Network-based Language Teaching
and the Development of
Intercultural Communicative Competence

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CALL   Computer Assisted Language Learning

CACL   Computer Assisted Culture Learning

CMC   Computer Mediated Communication

EFL   English as a Foreign Language

ESL   English as a Second Languag

FLT   Foregn Language Teaching

ICC   Intercultural Communicative Competence

LAN   Local Area Network

MOO   Multiple-User Domain, Object-Oriented

NBLT   Network-Based Language Teaching

SLA   Second Language Acquisition

TELL   Technology Enhanced Language Learning

WWW   World Wide Web

Introduction

Over the past six years at universities in Spain and in Germany, I have been engaging my students in on-line exchanges with partners in foreign cultures. In some cases, the educational outcomes of these exchanges have been enlightening and very positive. However, in other cases, they have been quite disappointing. The following comments, which were made by an English and a Spanish student in the light of their experiences in an e-mail exchange which I organised between their two classes, are quite representative of both extremes:

> "I think our tasks helped us to discover and think about our own culture and how people see us. I agree with Lourdes when she says that you never know the image people have of your country until you do something like this." (Sonya, from England)

> "My opinion about them [the British] was not good at the beginning and I'm afraid it continues the same… They've got some stereotypes of Spain and they comply with them. They are not interested in learning." (Manuel, from Spain)

As these extracts illustrate, learning about the foreign culture and becoming more aware of one's own *may* be the outcome of on-line exchanges, but this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, the evidence in a growing number of reports in the literature suggests that many learners engaged in such activities simply confirm their stereotypes and fail to establish good working relationships with their partners (Belz, 2002; Meaghar and Castaños, 1993; O'Dowd, 2003). With this in mind, this study looks at the ways in which communication technologies can contribute to intercultural learning and examines what teachers and students need to know and to do in order to fully benefit from their on-line activities.

First of all, it is important to define the two terms in the title of this thesis. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is the ability to interact effectively in a foreign language with members of cultures different to our own (Byram, 1997a; Guilherme, 2000). This includes the skills of being able to discover and understand the symbolic meaning which is attributed to behaviour in different cultures. It also involves an awareness that one's own way of seeing the world is not *natural* or *normal,* but culturally determined. ICC has been taken up eagerly by many educators as it has

served to highlight the important role of culture in communication and in foreign language education.

Network-based Language Teaching (NBLT) refers to the use of computers connected to one another in local or global networks for the purpose of teaching foreign languages (Warschauer 2000a; Warschauer and Kern, 2000). One of the most common applications of NBLT is *telecollaboration* and this activity will be at the centre of the research reported here. This is defined by Belz in the following way:

> "internationally-dispersed learners in parallel language classes use Internet communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat, threaded discussion, and MOOs (as well as other forms of electronically mediated communication), in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange." (2003a: 1)

In order to establish in what ways network-based learning activities can contribute to making foreign language learners better intercultural communicators, I will report on research carried out in three different classes at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany. In these studies, in which I took on the roles of both course instructor and action researcher, I explored how on-line interaction with members of other cultures, as well as the study of Cultural Studies resources located in virtual learning environments, contributed to the development of learners' intercultural skills, attitudes, knowledge and awareness.

The topic of this research is of relevance to the area of foreign language education and, in particular to Cultural Studies, as it examines how new technologies can provide a high level of exposure to the target culture to students who are located in their own classrooms. Celia Roberts explains why such access is necessary: "One of the challenges for the near future is to support those many thousands of students who have no realistic prospect of visiting Britain or other English-speaking countries as part of their course" (1994: 51). While student exchange programs such as Erasmus are more popular than ever, there are many students who, whether due to economic reasons or simply due to a lack of motivation, will not have the experience of learning their chosen foreign language in a country where it is spoken. NBLT offers a powerful alternative to traditional classroom-based culture learning methods, as it allows learners to interact and learn directly from actual members of the target culture while remaining in their

home environment. Activities which bring together two classes in different cultures, such as collaborating together on the creation of websites, discussing different interpretations of film and literature, or carrying out comparative investigations on different aspects of their cultures, give learners the opportunity to engage in genuine intercultural communication and to learn more about the culture of their distant partners in an authentic and motivating way.

Of course, the topic of this research also holds relevance for third-level students' overall preparation for living and working in today's information society. Network-based activities play an important role in preparing university learners for their careers in a modern society which will probably involve a great deal of on-line work and communication. As Warschauer points out: "many students will need to carry out some form of collaborative long-distance inquiry and problem-solving as part of their jobs and community activities" (2000b: 64). Much of this on-line activity will require more than just *electronic literacy*, it will require *intercultural electronic literacy*. While much of the media-hype surrounding the internet may give the impression that on-line environments play down linguistic and cultural differences, there is a considerable amount of evidence in the literature concerning the importance of the social and cultural dimensions of computer-mediated communication (Herring, 1996; Kim and Bonk, 2002; Kramsch and Thorne, 2002; Murray, 2000). As the research in this thesis will also clearly illustrate, attitudes to how the internet should be used and as regards what is appropriate on-line behaviour can differ radically between cultures. Learners (and teachers) therefore need to be given training in how to apply their intercultural communicative skills to on-line as well as to face-to-face environments.

Although network-based learning and telecollaboration have been in use now for almost 15 years (Cummins and Sayers, 1995), it is still relatively unclear how on-line contact actually contributes to intercultural learning. While much of the research on NBLT has looked at the development of autonomy and language fluency through on-line interaction, only limited attention has been paid to the cultural learning outcomes (Kern, 2002; Moore, 1998). Instead of sound research, there often seems to be an assumption on the part of educators that engaging learners in on-line contact with members of the target culture will automatically produce more positive attitudes and a better understanding of the role of culture in language learning (Richter, 1997). It is

hoped that the research presented in this study will go some way towards addressing this problem.

However, it is important to note that this thesis should not be seen as a blind argument in favour of NBLT. Instead, I would consider this research as an exploration of NBLT's *potential* for intercultural learning and my findings will, I hope, contribute to an understanding of how this potential can best be exploited. As such, I subscribe to the following observation by Knobel, Lankshear, Honan and Crawford:

> "we are convinced that CIT's [communications and information technologies], like any technologies in the hands of competent teachers and motivated and reflective learners, *can* enhance learning: in any field, including second language. Blind enthusiasm, wishful thinking, and romantic adoption of fads and trends will not, however, contribute to this cause. What we need are sober and systematic assessments of actual practises, and the careful elucidation of exemplar cases across as wide a range of approaches, contexts, resource bases and experience as possible." (Knobel et. al., 1998: 47)

It is my intention that the following chapters will contribute to the above-mentioned *sober assessment* of current practices in NBLT. I hope to achieve this in the following manner. Chapter one of this thesis sets out to establish what *developing intercultural communicative competence* actually involves. To achieve this I carry out a review of the changing role of the cultural dimension in foreign language education and I explore the different components of intercultural communicative competence. Various methods for developing ICC are also examined and two specialised approaches, Cultural Studies and Ethnography for language learners, are outlined in detail. Chapter two explores the developing role of the cultural dimension in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and identifies certain characteristics of NBLT which can potentially support the development of ICC. The relationship between ICC and electronic literacies is also explored in this chapter. Following that, chapter three contains a description of the research methodology which was used in the empirical research. This combined elements of both ethnography and action research. It will be argued that qualitative research methodology was particularly suited to this area as it permitted me to become more aware of the issues which the students considered pertinent in these on-line learning scenarios.

Chapters four, five and six report on the empirical research which was carried out in the English department at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Each chapter explores the application of a different combination of communication tools in order to develop learners' ICC. Chapter four focuses on a group of language learners who took part in an e-mail exchange and a *Cultura*-style web-based exchange with two groups of American students. Chapter five explores the outcome of a web-based course in Irish Cultural Studies which involved the study of on-line content and participation in a message-board exchange with Irish students. Chapter six reports on an advanced language course dedicated to the development of ethnographic interviewing skills through an exchange with American students via e-mail and videoconferencing. In the conclusion, I bring together the results of all three studies in order to examine their implications for NBLT, foreign language teacher education and the role of culture in foreign language teaching.

Throughout this thesis, the reader will notice that particular attention has been paid to the German perspective on this subject. This is due to two main reasons. Firstly, German academics and teachers have made a tremendous contribution to the literature on this subject and have been instrumental in the development of intercultural perspectives on foreign language teaching. Secondly, as this research has been carried out in Germany, it has been perhaps inevitable that my writing should be influenced by the German literature as much as by that in my mother tongue.

1. The Cultural Dimension in Foreign Language Education

"There is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language; they go together like Sears & Roebuck – or Marks & Spencer, as the case may be." (*Valdes, 1990: 20)*

1.1 Introduction

Until recently, a term commonly used in English to describe dealing with culture in foreign language education was *Background Studies*. This reflected the common belief in foreign language education that culture learning involved background information which should support learners in their *real* business of studying a foreign language or its literature. For many generations of language learners (myself included), this has been, to a great extent, the attitude to culture which has been reflected in our classes and our textbooks. However, this view contrasts starkly with the growing importance attributed to cultural studies and the intercultural aspects of language learning in many modern curricula and academic publications. The English National Curriculum for modern foreign languages underlines the importance of encouraging positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages and their way of life (Byram and Fleming, 1998), while the curriculum for upper secondary level in Nordrhein-Westfalen (the federal *Land* of Germany where this thesis was written) declares that intercultural competence is "Leitziel des modernen Fremdsprachenunterrichts" (MSWWF Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1999: 7) Similarly, influential academic publications, both here in Germany and beyond, by authors such as Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003), Bredella, Christ and Legutke (2001), Mountford and Wadham-Smith (2001) and Roche (2001) have all highlighted the important role of culture in foreign language education.

Therefore, it would appear evident that the cultural aspects of language learning have moved from the background to the forefront of the foreign language teaching profession. But this raises some important questions. First of all, why has the role of culture recently become so important to foreign language teaching (FLT)? Secondly, what do the activities *culture learning* and developing *intercultural competence* actually mean? Thirdly, what approaches and techniques are available to language teachers who wish to integrate culture into their classes? In this chapter I set out to find the answers to these questions, although I am well aware that none of them are likely to have definitive answers. Essentially, I am interested in establishing how I, as a teacher of EFL and

action researcher, can prepare my learners to become effective intercultural communicators. I want them to move beyond a level of competence in English which allows them to merely 'get by' as tourists in the foreign language but ultimately to remain untouched by the experience of coming into contact with other languages and cultures. Before outlining the organisation of this chapter, some general observations and issues should be outlined.

First of all, in reference to my first question, it is important to point out that the reasons for the changing attitudes to culture learning have often had more to do with developments in politics and society than with advances in second language acquisition research. This is confirmed by Buttjes and Byram:

> "Language teaching is a political activity and the nature and presence of cultural studies at any given moment is the clearest indicator of the kind of political activity involved." (1991: 31)

Foreign language education does not occur in isolation. Rather, it takes place in a complex social and political environment and its goals and its methodologies will inevitably reflect certain beliefs in how the world should develop and what role our learners should play in this world. This link between politics and foreign language education can sometimes be quite obvious. For example, the manner in which *Landeskunde* was manipulated for political purposes in the pre-second world war years in Germany may be easy to identify and should, according to Stern "serve as both a lesson and a warning when we consider present-day attempts to teach culture" (1983: 247). Similarly, Hirsch's (1987) cultural literacy, a collection of 5,000 cultural items which he claimed that every American needed to know, reflected a 'back to basics' drive among conservative American educationalists who were, inevitably, making very clear statements about what social and ethnic groups were true Americans by establishing a canon of cultural knowledge for that culture.

A second observation refers to the question of what *culture learning* should actually entail in the foreign language classroom. The manner in which culture learning has been dealt with in foreign language classrooms has, to a great extent, been dependent on the definition of culture which educators have brought to the area. Kramsch identifies two main definitions, the first of which comes from the humanities. It focuses on "the way a social group represents itself and others through its material productions, be they works

of art, literature, social institutions, or artefacts of everyday life" (1996: 2). The second definition originates from the social sciences and sees culture as "the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community" (ibid). Stern (1983) suggests that for many years the former has been dominant in foreign language education as language teachers have come from a background in the humanities and have therefore not been exposed to sociological and anthropological approaches. For this reason, culture learning has to a great extent been associated with the learning of facts and figures and, in particular, a country's history and its political institutions. Such content has constituted the main part of *Landeskunde*, or Cultural Studies courses in many countries and has generally failed to make any real connection between a country's language and its culture. The absence of ethnographic concepts such as Agar's 'Languaculture' (1994: 22), which highlight the link between language and culture, has meant that the ways culture may be imbedded in language have rarely been adequately dealt with. As a result, in third level education the study of culture has often been completely separated from language learning and has instead been established as an independent subject of study (Zeuner, 1999).

One final observation should be made as to where culture learning actually takes place. Approaches to teaching culture in foreign language education have produced two overlapping types of methodology. Firstly, specific courses on 'British Life and Institutions' or *Landeskunde* have been established to concentrate on the transmission and presentation of facts about the target culture's history and institutions. However, it will be seen later on that recent developments have seen these courses take on a more scientific approach. Secondly, in the EFL classroom itself, aspects of the day-to-day behaviour of the culture's members have been presented in authentic materials and textbooks. In recent years, both these approaches have received a considerable amount of criticism for being both superficial and uncritical in their treatment of cultural content. In the *Landeskunde* context, students are often faced with descriptions of facts about the target culture and are expected to accept these without further reflection or to look beyond these facts at the values and ideologies which may underlie them (Kastendiek, 2000). In the language classroom, the cultural materials are often only used as a source of language content which is to be employed to improve learners communicative skills and there is rarely a critical reflection on the cultural content itself (Wallace, 2002). Byram suggests that it is often expected that simply encountering these

materials will have a transforming effect on learners, making them reflect on the their own culture and empathise with the foreign. However, how this should happen is often quite unclear:

> "FLT theorists do not, with some exceptions…, take an analytical approach but simply expect that comparison by juxtaposition will lead to consciousness-raising and 'awareness', which are insufficiently defined. The notion of 'empathy' in particular, which is considered a basis for successful communication, is uncritical and normative. Learners are expected to accept and understand the viewpoint and experience of the other, not to take a critical, analytical stance." (Byram, 1997b: 61)

This chapter is divided into three main sections. Each one of these sections will deal with one of the three questions asked at the outset of this introduction. The first charters the development of culture teaching over the past decades and attempts to identify the reasons for the emergence of intercultural approaches to language and culture learning in recent years. The second section outlines what is understood under the term 'intercultural communicative competence' and explores the different interpretations of this approach. The terms *intercultural learning* and *intercultural communicative competence* are often used to refer to many different things in foreign language education and it is hoped that this section will clarify my own understanding of the term and also justify this choice. (In this thesis I will follow Grosch and Leenan (1998) and refer to intercultural learning as the process which learners engage in to develop their intercultural communicative competence.) The third and final section looks at how intercultural communicative competence is being developed in the foreign language education. After reviewing the role of textbooks and traditional sources of culture learning materials, two well-known approaches which have intercultural competence as their central aim will be explored. These are ethnography for language learners and a modern interpretation of Cultural Studies for foreign language learners. These two approaches illustrate what I believe to be practical applications of the principles of intercultural learning and they will both be applied to on-line scenarios in the empirical research which follow in chapters three, four and five.

1.2 The Developing Role of the Cultural Dimension

This section looks at the changing role of culture in foreign language education over the past decades. By presenting this overview, I hope to illustrate the polemic nature of this topic and to highlight the important fact that there is no one undisputed approach to what role culture should play in the foreign language classroom. It will be seen that the chosen approach will depend on current work in second language acquisition and language teaching methodology, on the influence of social and political issues and, inevitably, on the beliefs and values of the teacher involved.

1.2.1 Approaches in the Post-War Period

Accounts of the role of culture in foreign language education in the time leading up to the second world war by Buttjes (1991), Kramer (2000a), Lessard-Clouston (1997) and Stern (1983) are all in agreement as to the peripheral role which the sociocultural dimension played during this period. The emphasis on linguistics and literary criticism which existed at this time meant that both language practice and background information about the target culture were attributed only minor importance. Language learning was considered a necessary tool in order to access the great works of literature of the foreign cultures and it was expected that, through reading these works, students would also learn about the foreign culture.

However, in the run-up to the second world war, the German version of Cultural Studies was manipulated in order to achieve more sinister objectives. *Landeskunde*, or *Kulturkunde* as it was better known at the time, was used by the German authorities to emphasise the different national characters and the underlying 'Geist' or mindsets of Germany and her enemies, France and Britain. It was hoped that an understanding of these differences would lead to knowledge of each country's strengths and weaknesses and that this would later serve to benefit the national cause. Kramer suggests that the subject was "not so much interested in understanding the foreign culture(s) as aimed at reinforcing the German identity of the learners" (2000a: 325).

In the post-war years, Buttjes explains that teachers and textbook publishers in Germany reacted to the misuse of *Kulturkunde* by the Nazis by returning the focus of foreign language education to literature and aspects of human life which they believed

to "transcend times and cultures" (1991: 57). Nevertheless, American influence and political moves to bring France and Germany closer together through European integration meant that the subject became influenced by the values of democracy, intercultural understanding and the need to develop positive images of the foreign culture.

In the post-war period in the United States, the Humanities' view of culture as being made up of "intellectual refinement" and "artistic endeavour" (Brooks, 1964:83) (i.e. a definition of culture which is known today as culture with a capital 'C') was gradually replaced or supplemented by the anthropological view that culture should be seen as the way of life of a society (small 'c' culture). The work in sociology and anthropology by writers such as Haugen (1953), Malinowski (1921), Weinreich (1953) and Whorf (1956) lead to a greater awareness among language educators of the relationship between language, culture and society. While the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which posited that language determined thought and the way of seeing the world, was considered too extreme by many theorists, the strong links between language and culture, in the form, for example, of the cultural connotations of words, were acknowledged by writers such as Nostrand (1966: 15) and Seelye (1968: 49). The quantity of work being published on culture learning at the time lead Stern to challenge what he saw to be one of the fallacies about language education of that time:

> "It is a common misconception to believe that language teaching theory of the fifties and sixties stressed only the purely linguistic side. Theory recognised that cultural teaching must be integrated with language training" (1983:250)

Nevertheless, the increased emphasis on 'small c' or the anthropological approach to culture and language learning was to have limited effect on how foreign languages were taught in the 1960's and 1970's. This was due to two principal reasons. Firstly, the rise of structuralism and behaviourism in Europe and the United States during that time meant that the cultural context was rejected due to its perceived lack of relevance for language learning per se. These new approaches to language learning led to the emergence of audiolingualism with its emphasis on the use of the technologies of the time, such as the tape recorder and language laboratory, and its focus on the structure of language as opposed to studying it in its sociocultural context. Due to this development,

Buttjes describes culture as only being considered important in situations of tourism and consumerism:

> "Therefore textbooks continued to teach pupils how to ask their way and how to buy things. More ambitious forms of culture were not completely banned from language courses, but were relegated to marginal positions of a pragmatic, minimal or immanent Landeskunde." (1991: 58)

The second problem with adopting an anthropological approach to culture and language learning was, according to Stern (1983), the lack of clarity with which such methodology should be developed. If culture was to involve all aspects of life, as assumed in anthropological definitions of the term, then it became difficult to deal with it on a practical level in the classroom. Attempts were made by theorists to resolve this problem by selecting a number of organised, limited topics in the form of models of culture learning. Brooks (1960) suggested in his model over 50 topics but these were criticised for being inconclusive and as having a strong North American bias. Similarly, Nostrand (1974:276) proposed his 'emergent model' which was based on sociological and anthropological concepts and made up of four sub-systems – culture, society, ecology and the individual. This model was reported to have been adapted with relative success in the classroom by Nostrand himself and it can be summarised in the following way:

- Culture: dominant values, habits of thought, and assumptions; its verifiable knowledge, art forms, language, paralanguage, and kinesics
- Society: social institutions and the organisation of interpersonal and group relations: family, religion, economic-occupational organisation, political and judicial system, education etc. Social norms, social stratification. Conflict and resolution of conflicts.
- Ecology: attitudes towards nature, exploitation of nature, technology, travel and transportation etc.
- The Individual: 'What a person does with the shared patterns: conforming, rebelling, exploiting, innovating' etc. (Adapted from Nostrand, 1974: 276)

The model obviously presents a very vast overview of themes and topics and Stern again questions the adaptability and manageability of the model to the everyday realities of the language classroom. Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein and Colby (2000) also criticise this model and others of the time for focussing on "surface level behaviour" and for not taking into account "the underlying value orientations" nor "the variability of behaviour within the target cultural community" (2000: 3). Therefore, the lack of practical models

of culture learning in the literature, along with a lack of teaching material which would firstly, highlight the link between language and culture and secondly, provide sociocultural data on modern western societies, meant that anthropological approaches were to have more of an impact on the theory than on the practice of foreign language education.

1.2.2 The 1980's and the Rise of Communicative Competence

The role of culture in foreign language education in the 1980's appears to have been dominated by two distinctly different approaches. In the first of these, many educators continued to use a cognitive interpretation of Cultural Studies (described by Risager (1998) as 'the monocultural approach' and well known in Germany as *Landeskunde*). Essentially, this involved the transmission of facts about the target culture's political institutions, history and 'high culture'. The understanding of culture behind this approach relied heavily on the principle that there was one complete 'essence' or 'reality' about the target culture which could be presented to learners. The approach, although extremely popular, was often criticised for its inability to deal with the issue of variation within the 'national culture', its neglect of the relationship between the home and target cultures and also for its clear separation of language from culture (Risager, 1998; Zeuner, 1999). On an academic level, *Landeskunde* was never considered a separate scholarly discipline as it was often seen as a collection of unrelated themes and lacked its own methods of scientific analysis (Kane, 1991; Kastendiek, 2000).

In contrast to the cognitive approach, communicative language teaching and the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research were more successful at understanding language and culture learning as part of the same process. SLA research often considered culture as one of a number of variables which contributed to the success of language learning. However, in both the American and German contexts, writers such as Stern (1991) and Buttjes (1991) point out that although the communicative approach acknowledged the sociocultural dimension of language learning, the primary focus remained on roles and behaviour. As such, the learners' sociocultural background was, to a great extent, ignored. Culture was merely one of a number of aspects which needed to be taken into account in order to achieve communicative competence.

Byram, Morgan and Colleagues (1994) looked at two studies of second language acquisition which considered the role of culture on the road to communicative competence and found that: "culture is appreciated in these theoretical approaches but generally only as a support to linguistic proficiency" (1994: 7). In the first of these, Gardner and Lambert's model of motivation in language learning (1972), the social and cultural background of the learners was shown to influence their attitudes to language learning, and consequently, the outcomes of the language learning process. The authors divided the outcomes of the SLA process into 'bilingual proficiency' and 'non-linguistic outcomes'. The second group included attitudes, self-concept, cultural values and beliefs. Attitudes towards the other culture were therefore seen to be both part of the cause and the outcome of language learning. The second study, Schumann's acculturation model or model of social distance (1978), looked at the relationship between the learner's culture and the target culture and considered the adaptation of the learner to the new culture as the key to successful language learning: "The degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language" (Schumann, 1978: 34). According to Schumann, achieving acculturation was principally dependent on the degree of 'social distance' between the home and target cultures. He explained what he meant by social distance in the following:

> "In relation to the TL group, is the 2LL group politically, culturally, technically or economically dominant, non-dominant of subordinate? Is the integration pattern of the 2LL group assimilation, acculturation, or preservation? What is the 2LL group's degree of enclosure? Is the 2LL group cohesive? What is the size of the 2LL group? Are the cultures of the two groups congruent? What are the attitudes of the two groups toward each other? What is the 2LL group's intended length of residence in the target language area." (1976: 136)

Based on these factors, Schumann attempted to establish what good or bad language learning situations might look like. Bad situations included, for example, when both groups felt that a relationship of dominance/ subordination existed between the two cultures involved. One of the three integration strategies suggested by Schumann was acculturation, i.e. learning to function in the new culture while maintaining one's own identity, the other two being assimilation and preservation.

Apart from the work on SLA, the 1980's also witnessed the rise of communicative language teaching. This moved the emphasis in foreign language education from grammatical or structural approaches to a more communicative and functional emphasis and focussed on developing the learners' skills in communicative situations. Emerging from the work of writers such as Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) and Van Ek (1976) among others, the communicative approach was based strongly on the goal of communicative competence. Communicative competence refers to the native speaker's ability to use and interpret language appropriately in the process of interaction and in relation to the social context. The term added to Chomsky's linguistic competence and focussed more on the sociocultural and interactive aspects of language and language learning. Canale and Swain claimed that a communicative approach to language learning would lead to "a more natural integration" (1980: 31) of language and culture. Van Ek's model of communicative ability (1986) reflected this increased emphasis on sociocultural aspects by including, apart from linguistic, discourse and strategic competences, sociolinguistic competence (i.e. awareness of the way that language use can be affected by social factors), sociocultural competence (awareness of the different sociocultural contexts within which languages are located) and social competence (the willingness and ability to interact with others).

However, despite this increased focus on sociocultural elements, writers have been critical of the way that communicative language teaching has tended to ignore the sociocultural dimension of these proposed models of communicative competence, and that it has instead assumed a certain universality in the way in which speech functions are used and interpreted. As early as 1974, Paulston pointed out that the communicative approach was tending to concentrate mainly on referential meaning while ignoring the social meaning of words and phrases. Buttjes (1991) suggests that communicative language teaching excluded the learners' cultural background and failed to see the acquisition of communicative competence as a process of cultural adaptation. Instead, teachers used role-plays and video observations to train their learners in the use of pragmatic strategies and appropriate speech functions in authentic situations. Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan and Street (2001) conclude that, while communicative language methodology has done much to highlight the social contexts of language use, it:

> "has come to be interpreted somewhat narrowly and prescriptively, as
> appropriate language use rather than competence in the social and cultural

practices of a community of which language is a part." (Roberts *et. al.*, 2001:26)

However, it appears that the absence of overt attention to the learners' cultural background in the communicative methodologies of the 1970's and 1980's was motivated by a more complex set of reasons than simply a narrow interpretation of what communicative competence involved. Firstly, the lack of a cultural component during that time (and, to some extent, still today) reflects a common belief that English should be considered a global language or *Lingua franca.* Of course, this could only be achieved if English was seen as "a neutral vehicle of communication, an empty structural system that does not carry with it cultural, political and ideological baggage" (Anderson, 2003: 81). Therefore, it was necessary to try and disassociate English from its cultural heritage. The argument at the time seemed to imply that as students were going to be using English in contexts other than in English speaking cultures, then it was unnecessary to burden them with information about these cultures. Commentators such as Gray (2002) have pointed out how the ELT industry adopted this trend in the 1980's by moving the location of EFL textbooks from Britain and the United States to international settings. Similarly, instead of dealing with issues of relevance to the learners' target or home cultures, the content of textbooks focussed more on 'bland' topics such as *travel* and *the future* and thereby avoided any risk of insulting buyers from different cultural backgrounds.

The other reason for the decline of the cultural component in language teaching during this period also had a political background. In the late 1980's, writers such as Brumfit (1985), Phillipson (1992) and Prodromou (1988) were influential in making English language educators question the consequences and impact of their profession. Phillipson's work in particular caused many to consider whether English language teaching represented some kind of new, more subtle form of linguistic and cultural imperialism and whether their methodologies and materials had more to do with assimilation of learners than with their empowerment. As a result of this preoccupation with avoiding the imposition of their cultural values and principles on their students, Pulverness suggests that English teachers chose to avoid cultural content completely:

"At a time when Britain no longer occupies a dominant political position in the world, it is perhaps reassuring for teachers to feel that they are permitted to treat English purely in terms of a language system, uncomplicated by any

cultural sub-text. Cultural knowledge in EFL classrooms … has remained largely peripheral to language learning, acquired by students incidentally, but rarely focussed on for its own sake." (1995:25)

One of the principal outcomes of the decline in cultural content in communicative language teaching was that it moved the focus of the language classroom from preparing learners to read in the foreign language to being tourists in the foreign country. The content of many communicative syllabuses involved helping learners to buy bus tickets, ask the way and order food in the target language. This was criticised by many as a superficial approach which lead to the trivialisation of language learning and a lack of motivation among students. Pennycock sees it as being responsible for creating what he describes as "the empty babble of the communicative language class" (1994: 311). Bredella and Christ (1995) suggest that the problem with this approach was that learners were encouraged to believe that interlocutors from different cultures would automatically mean and understand the same thing when engaged in conversation together. Therefore, there was no need for learners to ask others what they meant by their utterances and, and as a result, to find out more about the different worldview of their partners. In other words, no 'negotiation of meaning' ever took place. In the search for a solution to this problem, many commentators believed that the anodyne nature of communicative language teaching materials could be replaced by a return to more cultural-specific content which would highlight different cultural interpretations of words and utterances (Durant, 1997). However, Byram *et. al.* (1994) warned that this cultural element needed to be approached in a different way than before:

> "In teaching language and culture some recent areas of focus in Britain have reflected the tourist's outsider experience of a culture: food, places and buildings of historical interest, historical personalities etc. In order to empathise more closely with natives of a particular country these should be replaced by topics that relate more directly to individuals' experiences within that culture, the home, the workplace, the social norms and expectations." (Byram et al, 1994:26)

Despite of all this heavy criticism of communicative methodology, the 1980's did see a steady rise in the amount of work being carried out in relation to culture learning. Stern's major publication (1983) contained an overview of the role of culture in language teaching, and this was accompanied by other influential works, particularly in the area of EFL and ESL, by Seelye (1984), Damen (1987) and Valdes (1990). Byram *et. al.* (1994) also identify various culture specific aspects of communication which

were identified in work on communicative competence during this period. They include the use of silence, levels of volume, length and frequency of turn-taking and the consequences of interactants having different cultural schemata. However, he concludes that "in only a handful of texts is cultural learning valued as an equal complement to language learning and as an activity in its own right" (1994:10).

In summary, it becomes evident that the recent literature on culture learning has, for the most part, been more critical of the *interpretation* of the communicative competence approach than of the ideas of Canale and Swain and Van Ek themselves. The reasons for these narrow interpretations have been sent to be political as well as didactic. More recently, more serious criticism of communicative competence has come from many educators in regard to the establishment of the native speaker as the standard which language learners are expected to achieve. This will be looked at in more detail in the following section.

1.2.3 The Native and the Intercultural Speaker

Perhaps the ultimate complement one can pay a learner of a foreign language is to confuse them with being a native speaker. However, in recent years writers such as Byram (1997a), Kramsch (1998), House (2000) and Judd (1999) have called into question whether models of communicative competence, which are based on native speaker proficiency, are inevitably setting a goal for language learners which is both unrealistic and undesirable. Byram (1997a: 8) points out that the work on communicative competence by Canale and Swain (1980) and Van Ek (1986) had been based on Hyme's (1972) broadening of Chomsky's notion of 'competence', which itself was based on communication among native speakers. As a result, Byram claims that language learners have been expected to "model themselves on first language speakers, ignoring the significance of the social identities and cultural competence of the learner in the interaction" (1997a: 8). Looking in more detail at Van Ek's model of communicative ability, he identifies its linguistic and sociolinguistic competences as those which are most subjected to having the native speaker as their model. Van Ek expects learners to speak and write "in accordance with the rules of the language concerned" (1986: 39), implying thereby that learners should learn and use the rules of communication which are employed by native speakers. Byram points out that sociocultural competence, as understood by Van Ek, is also dependent on the norms of

the native speaker as it requires learners to be familiar with the context in which native speakers use the language.

Byram sees two principal failings with the establishment of the native speaker as the norm for language learners to follow. Firstly, setting such a standard implies setting learners a goal which they are unlikely ever to reach. Byram points out that even in the literature on bilingualism, it is recognised that few if any bilinguals achieve an equal level in both their languages – neither in linguistic, sociolinguistic nor sociocultural competence. His second criticism is that requiring learners to achieve the level of a native speaker in a second language would require learners to be, what he describes as "linguistically schizophrenic" (1997a: 11), being able to abandon one language and culture and 'take on' the other whenever necessary. Such stressful behaviour risks causing learners to develop the psychological state of culture shock. In a later publication, Byram and Fleming (1998) develop this idea further:

> "It is not possible, nor desirable, for learners to identify with the other nor to deny their own identity and culture. Yet in terms of linguistic learning this has been the implicit aim for many years. We have judged the best language learner to be the one who comes nearest to a native speaker mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of the language, and who can therefore 'pass for' or be identified as, a native, communicating on an equal footing with natives." (1998: 8)

Kramsch (1998), concentrates more on the sociological and political consequences of the importance which is attributed to the native speaker and looks at how membership of the group 'native speaker' has been awarded – by birth, by education, or by membership to the social community - and analyses the weaknesses which each of these involve. According to the author, being born in the country does not make one automatically a native speaker, as many people who are born into a society do not automatically come to know and speak the standard dialect of that society, for example Glaswegians in Scotland or children born of Chinese immigrants in the United States. She also rejects the theory that being educated in a language is sufficient to achieve native speaker status, as the membership of this group involves much more than fluency and full communicative competence in the language. Instead, "one must be recognised as a native speaker by the relevant speech community" (1998: 22). Kramsch therefore concludes that the term native speaker is more social and political than linguistic and she suggests that the realities such as increased use of English as a *lingua franca*, the

multicultural nature of modern societies and the increasing importance given to non-standard English dialects has rendered the term an "outdated myth" (1998: 23).

As an alternative approach, she refers to Thomas's (1983) differentiation between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence refers to the ability to apply the appropriate pragmatic force to an utterance, while sociopragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language according to the social standards in a particular context. Thomas suggested that learners need to develop the pragmalinguistic competence of the native speaker and be able to use the range of strategies and linguistic forms with which native speakers realise speech acts, while, at the same time, learners should be allowed to choose whether they accept the same judgements as the native speaker in relation to when these strategies and forms should be used and "the size of imposition, cost/benefit, social distance, and relative rights and obligations" (1983: 104) which may be attributed to them.

Kramsch illustrates such an approach being put into action by using the example of indigenous American languages in modern day American society. Present-day users of Karuk, for example, have found it difficult to use the language in the same way as their elders may once have done when they lived in a closely knit, clearly structured tribal society. Speech acts such as making compliments, expressing thanks and extending invitations would previously not have been used frequently by the Karuk, but are now necessary in order for the speakers to function appropriately in the modern society of the USA. Therefore, modern-day users of the language are now using it in a sociopragmatic way which is very different to that of the native speakers of the past. Kramsch also refers to the alternative use of languages by immigrant language learners as another example of how the native speaker norm is becoming redundant:

> "Immigrant language learners are increasingly disinclined to ignore, let alone buy into the values and beliefs that underpin native speaker language use in their respective speech communities." (1998: 26)

In a modern society with such characteristics, Kramsch sees the need for the norm of the native speaker to be replaced by that of the 'intercultural speaker' who is not bound to fluency in the standard form of a language, but is instead able to adapt to

differing standards of appropriateness in order to engage in successful communication with others (1998: 27).

House, in her paper "How to remain a non-native speaker" (2000), looks at the analysis of pragmatic competence in second language acquisition (SLA) research and, similarly to Byram and Kramsch, criticises the lack of realism in setting the native speaker as the standard to be met by language learners. She is particularly critical of the fact that any variation from this standard is usually considered to be a deficiency on the part of the learners. In her review of the literature on interlanguage pragmatics, she found that much research continues to suggest that differences between the interlanguage of learners and the target language (L2) will result in miscommunication and pragmatic failure. This is, in her view, an over-simplistic assumption which does not hold with research in the literature of interactional sociolinguistics. She refers to research on code-switching among language learners carried out be Legenhausen (1991) and Burt (1990) to demonstrate her point. These writers found that learners often engage in code-switching between the L1 and L2, not due to a lack of proficiency in the target language (i.e. a deficiency), but in order to talk with their peers in their common L1 and thereby to maintain their double identities as good language learners and friendly classmates. House concludes from this research that

> "in order to overcome the limitations inherent in regarding L2 learners' language alternations as evincing nothing but linguistic incompetence, one needs to give NNS [non-native speakers] credit as communicators with complex communicative goals and strategies to implement these goals." (2000: 10)

Based on this assumption, House calls for the native speaker norm for pragmatic competence of language learners to be replaced by that of the 'stable' bilingual who, like the language learner, often uses the pragmatic behaviour of both languages to communicate and express themselves. As evidence for this, she refers to work on Japanese-English bilinguals who were found to use backchanneling less than Japanese monolinguals but more than American-English monolinguals. In her conclusion, House highlights the futility of expecting language learners to achieve the pragmatic competence of monolingual natives, as language learners are, by definition, bilinguals not monolinguals. She also echoes the ideas of Kramsch (1998) and Phillipson (1992) when she points out that language learners may be unwilling to give up aspects of their

own social and cultural identities by taking on the pragmatic norms of another culture and therefore these norms should not be imposed on them.

Judd (1999), in his review of approaches to teaching sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills in foreign language education, is in agreement with House in this point:

> "we cannot, and should not, require ESL students to adopt native speech acts any more than we should require our students to assimilate culturally. After exposure in class, some students may elect not to use native forms as a matter of individual choice, perhaps signalling a desire to maintain their own identity or their unwillingness to join the ESL cultural environment. On the other hand, others may need and want to adapt to native-speaker norms. Thus, it is incumbent on those of us teaching in an ESL situation to present pragmatic information to our students so that they have the tools to use such knowledge, should they desire." (Judd, 1999: 160)

However, Bredella (1999: 86) warns of the thin line which exists between the justified rights of maintaining one's own culture and language and the ethnocentric motives which may lie behind such an approach. He points out that refusing to learn the foreign language (including its pragma-linguistic aspects) may be a sign of rejecting the other culture and of unwillingness to cross cultural boundaries. He also refers to the argument of Mukherjee (1990) who claims that encouraging immigrant minorities to hold on strictly to their own culture and language may lead to them missing out on opportunities for social mobility. An effective compromise would appear to be Judd's and Kramsch's proposal referred to earlier, in which learners are taught the pragmalinguistic strategies and forms which are necessary to function successfully in the target language, but they are also given the right to use them to the extent which is in keeping with their own cultures and identities. However, House's proposal of an alternative to teaching the native speaker norm appears to be more radical. She suggests that, instead of teaching language as a symbol of identifying with a target culture, foreign languages (especially English, with its important role as a *lingua franca*) should be taught solely as an instrument of communication. The author believes that English instruction:

> "should equip learners of English as an L2 with a set of communicative-discursive skills designed to reach their communicative goals in collaboration with diverse interlocutors in a wide variety of contexts. Learners should be empowered to hold their own in listening to other non-native speakers, in realising their intended linguistic actions satisfactorily,

and in counteracting any 'reduction of their personality', a common side effect of learners' stunted expressive skills in an L2." (2000: 114)

As a consequence of this approach, House sees a need for the separation of the learning of English from the context of countries where it is spoken as a first language. In her view, there is no need for combining English language education with a particular cultural profile, for example teaching EFL in connection with courses of British and American literature or Cultural Studies. Risager (1998) supports this proposal in her review of current European approaches to culture learning. She criticises many approaches for presenting cultures as homogenous entities and thereby ignoring the multicultural and multiethnic realities of modern societies. As a more realistic alternative, Risager proposes 'the transcultural approach' which shifts the emphasis away from interaction with members of the traditional target cultures and, instead, locates the study and use of the target language "in all kinds of situations characterised by cultural and linguistic complexity, among others as a *Lingua franca* in international and interethnic communication" (Risager, 1998: 249). She suggests contact through the target language with other non-native speakers from other countries (for example through pen-friend or e-mail exchanges) as an example of this approach in action.

While the proposal of House and Risager that foreign language education should no longer focus solely on the cultures of the native speakers is to a certain extent justifiable, it is questionable whether Cultural Studies courses should completely abandon their focus on the 'traditional' target cultures. An exploration of a recent paper by Alptekin (2002), whose arguments are quite representative of the 'anti-Cultural Studies' school of thought, may serve to highlight the different sides of this debate.

The author's main argument against studying British and American cultural materials is the following:

> "How relevant, then, are the conventions of British politeness or American informality to the Japanese and Turks, say, when doing business in English? How relevant are such culturally-laden discourse samples as British railway timetables or American newspaper advertisements to industrial engineers from Romania and Egypt conducting technical research in English? How relevant is the importance of Anglo-American eye-contact, or the socially acceptable distance for conversation as properties of meaningful communication for Finnish and Italian academicians exchanging ideas in a professional meeting?" (2002: 51)

It is arguable that the use of these very examples of culture-specific content mentioned here can well be justified for various reasons. Firstly, by encountering such examples of culture specific behaviour in their classes, learners are made aware of the many different ways in which culture is connected to language learning. Learners need to be made aware that body language, politeness conventions and even bus timetables are not the same the world over and that they will need to use this awareness in situations of intercultural contact. Perhaps they will not use English in countries where English is the first language, but they will at least have the attitudes and skills necessary to recognise and deal with alternative behaviour. In other words, learners can take the skills, attitudes and understanding of cultural difference which they have gained from their work on, for example, Great Britain, and apply this to other intercultural situations involving members of other cultures. In the words of Mountford and Wadham-Smith: "What is important about British Studies is not so much the 'British' in it… . What is important is the study of culture and cultures, one's own and (an)other(s)" (2000: 9).

Furthermore, if educators are not to take cultural content from the target cultures, then what alternatives remain? Two options exist. Firstly, it was shown earlier that, in the 1980's, the attempt to replace cultural content in EFL textbooks with 'culture-general' materials often resulted in rather bland products (see section 1.2). This therefore can hardly be considered an appropriate option. The second, Alptekin's own proposal, is to "design instructional materials where cultural content chiefly comes from the familiar and indigenous features of the local setting so as to motivate the students and enhance their language learning experience" (2002: 52). While this solution may sound very politically correct, it may lack realism. First of all, teachers may find it difficult to get access to 'home-grown' English material in countries where English is a foreign language. Prodromou (1988) used in his EFL classes signs and graffiti and other such examples of English which he found around him in Greece. However, to use the examples mentioned by Alptekin himself, how much cultural content in English will Turkish and Japanese teachers find within their own culture? It is fair to speculate that there is hardly enough for a school syllabus.

A third argument against Alptekin's proposal to ignore Cultural Studies material refers to learners' rights and interests. It is often the reality that, even in a case such as

English which is commonly used as a *Lingua franca*, many learners of English (at least within the context of continental Europe) continue to learn English because they are interested in countries such as Great Britain, the USA or Ireland or because they plan to go and spend time there. These learners have the right to be exposed to materials which will inform them about the different aspects of these cultures. Simply because English has achieved the status of a Global Language, does this mean that the original 'home cultures' of English have to be abandoned because of this? Apltekin's arguments in this area would appear to lack consistency. For example, the author is critical that modern methodologies have failed

> "to provide an alternative to the conventional view that a language cannot be taught separately from its culture. This view is certainly sensible in the case of foreign language instruction, yet it fails miserably when it comes to teaching an international language, whose culture becomes the world itself." (ibid: 52)

It is unclear how in some cases language and culture should be taught together and in other cases they should not. Either culture plays an important role in the make-up of a language or it does not. If it does, and the author appears to accept that this is the case, then surely the cultural background of English-speaking nations continues to have an important influence on the English language, in exactly the same way that, for example, German culture is intertwined with the German language. The Bakhtian view of language suggests that language is not a neutral medium but rather one which is "…populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others" (Kramsch, 1993:27). If this is the case, then learners need to be made aware of the meanings which native speakers of English have instilled into their language over centuries of use. Pulverness argues that: "To attempt to divorce language from its cultural context is to ignore the social circumstances which gave it resonance and meaning" (2000:86). The fact that English is used by millions of non-native speakers world-wide will not change this fact. The English language will be marked by it use by non-native speakers but it will also continue to be influenced by its use in its first-language contexts as well.

Finally, Alptekin appears to be worried that focussing on the target culture will result in the learners' own culture being "peripheralized, if not completely ignored" (ibid, 52). However, if modern, comparative approaches to Cultural Studies are adopted in the classroom, this does not have to be the case. As will be seen later, many

approaches to Cultural Studies use the comparison between the home and target cultures to make students more aware of how their worldview is influenced by their own culture and also to encourage more critical analyses of the materials from the target culture.

In summary, in this section it has been shown how social and political factors such as increased migration and the growth of transnational communication (Kramer, 2000c) as well as a questioning of what the goals of the language learner should be have led to criticism of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching and its inherent 'native speaker as standard' model. As an alternative, recent approaches have proposed the 'intercultural speaker' as an alternative goal for models of foreign language learning. Byram and Fleming describe such a learner in the following way:

> "It is the learner who is aware of their own identities and cultures, and of how they are perceived by others, and who also has an understanding of the identities and cultures of those with whom they are interacting. This intercultural speaker is able to establish a relationship between their own and other cultures, to mediate and explain difference – and ultimately to accept that difference and see the common humanity beneath it." (Byram and Fleming, 1998: 8)

However, it has been questioned whether such an approach should not lead to an avoidance of materials which focus on the target culture itself. Studying target cultures does not imply that the norms, values and pragma-linguistic rules of this culture have to be imposed on the learner. Nevertheless, learners have a right to be exposed to the foreign culture in order to be made aware of alternative worldviews and to be given the option of 'taking on' aspects of this culture if it is in their personal interests.

In the following section the different aspects of intercultural communicative competence, i.e. the competences of the intercultural speaker, will be examined. It will be seen that models of learning based on developing such competence in learners have brought about a much more integrated approach to the teaching and learning of language and culture and that they require learners to develop appropriate attitudes, cultural awareness and skills as well as factual knowledge about the target culture. As is to be expected, there are many different interpretations of what intercultural learning and intercultural competence should involve, and I would agree with Zeuner (1999) that the responsibility lies with individual teachers to reach reasoned decisions as to which aims are most important and realistic for their own particular context. With this in mind,

at the end of the next section I will justify my choice of intercultural learning aims for my own empirical research. Also, it is important to point out that the aims of intercultural learning are intended to complement and expand on the linguistic aims of the language classroom and not to replace them.

1.3 Intercultural Communicative Competence

The previous section of this study looked at the emergence of 'the intercultural speaker' as the standard for foreign language education. It was seen that many authors claim this to be a more realistic and suitable alternative to the native speaker standard. Various current approaches to language/culture learning such as 'ethnography for language learners' and 'Cultural Studies' have taken on the intercultural speaker as the central goal of their approaches (Roberts *et. al.*, 2001: 36; Kramer, 2000c: 45) and have integrated models of intercultural communicative competence. The impact of intercultural perspectives on foreign language education in general has been such that already in 1991 Hüllen was able to suggest that: "Interkulturelle Kommunikation ist das vorrangige Ziel des Fremsprachenunterrichts. Sie hat die 'kommunikative Kompetenz' seit jüngsten verdrängt" (1991: 8).

Intercultural competence is defined by Guilherme (2000:297) as "the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognise as being different from our own" (2000: 297). Byram differentiates between communicative competence, which focussed on exchanging information, and this term which underlines the need to "decentre and take up the perspective of the reader" as well as "establishing and maintaining relationships" (1997a: 3). Apart from this emphasis on culture learning being an interactive process, intercultural perspectives have highlighted the interconnectedness of language learning and culture learning (Kramsch, 1993), the need for learners to be able to achieve a critical distance from their own cultures (Bredella, 1999) and the deconstruction of stereotypes and reduction of intolerance (Bredella and Delanoy, 1999) as being central goals of language/culture learning. However, it will be seen that the strong focus on affective and general education aims in intercultural learning has not been received without criticism in the literature.

This section therefore deals with the various characteristics of intercultural competence, in particular the learning objectives which it entails and the practical consequences it may have for foreign language teaching and learning. Each of the following sub-sections will offer an overview of the affective, cognitive and skill-based domains (Bloom, 1956) which the literature suggests make up integral parts of intercultural communicative competence.

1.3.1 The Affective Domain: Attitudes and General Education

Approaches to which attitudes teachers should aim to develop in their learners and how this should be achieved have changed considerably since the introduction of intercultural perspectives to language learning. For many years Cultural Studies seems to have been associated unquestioningly with the development of positive attitudes towards the target culture, the logic being that learners needed to view the target culture positively in order to want to learn the foreign language. However, it will be seen that recent literature have called this approach into question.

1.3.1.1 The Role of Positive Attitudes

As was seen earlier in section 1.1, research in SLA in the 1970's and 1980's had often focussed on how language learners' attitudes to the target culture would effect their success in learning the language. The work of Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1985) are among the best known in this area. Their findings suggested that the attitudes which learners held towards the target culture would be highly influential on the learners' level of motivation for learning the target language. A desire to understand and empathize with members of the target culture, they argued, would lead to an integrative orientation to learning their language. Gardner also suggested that positive attitudes would not only support learners of foreign languages, but would also be part of the non-linguistic outcomes of successful language learning. These non-linguistic outcomes were: " favourable attitudes toward the other cultural community, a general appreciation of other cultures, interest in further language study, etc." (1979: 199).

Looking at the context of English-speaking learners of French in Canada, much of Gardner's work focussed on whether intercultural contact (through visits and exchanges) between learners and members of the target culture would lead to more positive attitudes and, as a consequence, more successful language learning. Having reviewed the research on the area, Gardner concluded: "it is clear that visiting the other community and actively trying to use the language promotes a positive change in attitudes, primarily those directly involving the other community." (1985: 87)

However, he did admit that the quality and the nature of the contact was vital to the development of positive attitudes (1985: 88). In order for attitudes to the target culture

to be favourable, learners needed to have regular opportunities to use the target language with members of the other community and their experiences needed to be enjoyable.

Byram *et. al.* point out that the aim of encouraging positive attitudes among learners is usually accepted unquestioningly by teachers: "perhaps because 'positive attitudes' are so self-evidently good" (1994: 35). Brown, writing in a recent textbook for trainee-teachers, seems to demonstrate that this continues to be a generally held belief of the language teaching profession when he suggests the following:

> "It seems intuitively clear... that second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency. Yet the teacher needs to be aware that everyone has both positive and negative attitudes. The negative attitudes can be changed, often by exposure to reality - for example, by encounters with actual persons from other cultures." (1994: 169)

The belief that language learning should serve to develop among learners positive attitudes towards the target culture is even present in the curricula of various European countries. Risager, for example, points out the aim of developing positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages is present in the National Curriculum for England and Wales (1998: 245).

Interestingly, more recent research (Keller, 1991 and Coleman, 1998) has continued to investigate how residence abroad by language students can affect learners' stereotypes and attitudes. Coleman's extensive study of British and Irish third-level students on the Erasmus programme revealed that extended residence abroad did not reduce, but rather reinforced stereotypes which learners had about the target culture and that up to 30% of the students in the study had returned home with more negative attitudes than before they had left, thereby defeating one of the main aims of such exchange programmes. Coleman blamed these surprising results on the lack of preparation which students received before leaving for their period abroad and called for pre-residence abroad courses in the home universities which would raise students' awareness of their stereotypes and how they are formed.

However, intercultural approaches have caused a change in emphasis in regard to what attitudes language learners need to have. In contrast to previous approaches to language and culture learning, intercultural approaches no longer expect students to simply take on positive attitudes towards the target culture and its members. Byram outlines why this is the case:

> "Attitudes which are the pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction need to be not simply positive, since even positive prejudice can hinder mutual understanding. They need to be attitudes of curiosity and openness, of readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours." (1997a: 34)

Similarly, Bennet (1993), in his developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, warns against the limited nature of an understanding of culture where difference is recognised, but nevertheless minimised in order to highlight the 'universality' of human behaviour. Believing that 'deep down we all are the same' is, according to Bennett, not an adequate response to cultural difference. Although characteristics of cultures may have much in common at times, he sees this as not being relevant to the real issues of intercultural communication:

> "They [attitudes of universalism] fail to address the culturally unique social context of physical behavior that enmeshes such behavior in a particular worldview. Failure to consider this context leads people to assume that knowledge of the physical universals of behaviour is sufficient for understanding all other people. But, since no human behaviour exists outside some social context…, it is likely that people at this stage of development will unconsciously use their own cultural worldview to interpret behaviour they perceive." (Bennett, 1993: 43)

Instead, Bennett sees true intercultural sensitivity coming about when learners are able to understand others' behaviour as belonging to a particular cultural context and that it should therefore be viewed from within that context and not by the learners' own cultural standards. This issue will be returned to later in this section when the issue of intercultural understanding is dealt with.

1.3.1.2 Intercultural Approaches to Attitudes

Instead of simply encouraging a positive image of the target culture, current models of intercultural competence and Cultural Studies are emphasising openness and willingness to understand and accept difference. Doye's (1989) suggestions are quite representative of the aims to be found in the literature:

- "Openness, i.e. freedom from prejudice against people and beliefs of the other culture and openness to new experiences.
- Tolerance, i.e. the ability to accept ways of living and seeing the world which are different to one's own.
- Willingness to communicate, i.e. the willingness to become active and engage in communication with people and/or beliefs from the foreign culture." (1989: 129)

Byram (1997a) recognises that setting attitudes as learning aims or objectives may be difficult as it may not be possible to formulate them in ways which are observable or measurable. However, he goes on to point out that taking such an approach would be too restrictive for language-culture learning. The attitudes which he considers part of intercultural communicative competence are "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (1997a: 50). The objectives related to these attitudes are:

- "Willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality; this should be distinguished from attitudes of seeking out the exotic or of seeking to profit from others;
- Interest in discovering other perspectives or interpretations of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in other cultures and cultural practices;
- Willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment;
- Readiness to experience the different stages of adaptation to and interaction with another culture during a period of residence;
- Readiness to engage with the conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction." (Byram, 1997a: 50)

This list of attitudes cover many of the basic tenants of what is now considered to be intercultural learning. The basic principles of tolerance and openness to difference are covered through the list, while specific mention is given to the willingness to question and reflect critically on the values which underlie one's own culture (in the third attitude), while the second makes reference to a willingness to discover alternative

perspectives or the desire to interpret behaviour through the eyes of someone from the other culture. The two final objectives cover the areas of culture shock (the fourth objective) and different cultural approaches to verbal and non-verbal communication.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that not all recent models of culture-language learning have taken on the attitudes of openness and curiosity which have been shown in the examples above. Paige *et. al.*'s (2000) model continues to make reference to the need to develop *positive* attitudes towards the target culture, towards members of the target culture and towards different cultures in general, thereby reflecting the commonly held beliefs of the teaching profession in relation to attitudes. However, expecting students to develop positive attitudes to the target culture by trying to 'sell' them an attractive image of that culture may be expecting too much of them. In the words of Dlaska: "Learners do not respond well to teachers on a mission. We are, moreover, unreliable, and often prejudiced, sources of cultural information without necessarily being aware of it" (2000: 255). Instead of encouraging learners to view the target culture favourably, teachers may be more effective training learners to be interested in other cultures and to be open to difference. They could also encourage learners to find out why these differences exist between cultures and how products and practices are experienced from within the target culture itself. This cultural awareness will be looked at in the following sub-section.

1.3.1.3 'Intercultural Understanding' and other Humanistic Aims

In this sub-section I propose to look at the affective or humanistic aims (apart from the attitudes already mentioned above) which are considered to be particularly relevant to intercultural approaches to foreign language learning. In fact, many writers have suggested that one of these aims, intercultural understanding, (commonly referred to in German as '*Fremdverstehen*') is at the heart of intercultural language learning (Bredella, 1999; Baron, 2002). Others, however, have been critical of the strong stress on such affective aims on the foreign language classroom. This sub-section looks at what is meant by the humanistic elements of intercultural learning and at the reasons why many writers question the emphasis which is accorded to them in the literature.

'Intercultural understanding' is a term which appears to have suffered from over-use in recent years in the literature and, as a result, has lost a great deal of its impact. It

is common for authors and practitioners to claim that their work contributes to students' intercultural understanding, although it is often unclear what this exactly means or how it actually should come about. In the German-speaking world, the concept has been attributed more serious study (in the form of the postgraduate programme '*Didaktik des Fremdverstehens*') and a body of literature has been produced which has looked at, firstly, what '*Fremdverstehen*' should actually mean and secondly, how it can be achieved in the foreign language classroom (Bach, 2002; Bredella and Christ, 1995; Bredella, Christ and Legutke, 2000; Christ, 1996; Kramsch, 1993). The outcome of this work appears to have been a general agreement that the ability of a language learner to understand the values and perspectives of the foreign culture is not only an achievable goal but also an important one. Nevertheless, the idea that language learners can actually come to understand the inner-perspective of another culture has been called into question by many, particular in the field of post-colonial literature. In general, two central arguments against intercultural understanding can be identified. These will now be looked at briefly.

Firstly, the cultural determinist position suggests that learners are incapable of understanding another culture because they are prisoners of their own culture's categories, values and interests. Even though they may genuinely wish to understand the inner perspective of the other culture, when learners try to understand that which is foreign, they eventually take it over and convert it into their own cultural categories. Said, for example, claims it is impossible for Western studies of the Orient not to be influenced by their Western origins:

> "For if is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second." (1985:11)

Understanding is therefore, according to cultural determinism, an illusion and learners are destined never to understand a culture from the inner perspective. However, this view is seen by many as problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, Bredella and Christ argue that these arguments are exclusionary and racist, implying that only a

German can understand German culture and only an English person can understand English culture:

> "Obwohl diejenigen, die die Unmöglichkeit des Verstehens betonen, das Fremde gerade vor dem Zugriff durch den Verstehenden schützen wollen, führt ihre Auffassung zur Diskriminierung der Fremden, weil man diese auf ihre kulturelle, ethnische oder rassische Identität festlegt." (Bredella and Christ, 1995: 9)

Suggesting that only a German can understand the German worldview is to suggest there is some kind of essential German 'essence' which one is either born with or not. Secondly, there is ample evidence that our minds are capable of understanding other world-views. Learning a foreign language, for example, is something which is known to be achievable and this involves accepting and using a different linguistic system to describe the world. This new linguistic system requires learners to do much more than simply replace words and expressions from the mother tongue with new ones from the foreign language. Instead, they also have to take into account the different referential qualities and historical connotations which words have. In a foreign language, the learner has to accept that the world is, to a certain extent at least, organised and described by an alternative worldview. Similarly, ethnographers, like language learners, have been capable of describing a foreign culture from an insider's point of view. Such acts reveal how it is possible to progress from "incomprehensible alienity (Alienität) into comprehensible alterity (Alterität)" (Witte, 2000: 60).

Other critics, while they accept that understanding the foreign perspective may be possible, have criticised the concept as they assume it to involve abandoning one's own culture, blindly accepting the other culture and identifying with its value system. In other words, assimilation can be the only outcome of understanding another culture. This is, of course, not necessarily true. We can understand Nazism or slavery, argues Bredella, but this does not mean we accept what these stand for: "We can put ourselves in their position, but this does not mean that we become identical with them" (2002: 39).

But what, then, is expected of language learners when they study another culture? Intercultural understanding requires from the language learner both an openness to alternative perspectives as well as a critical awareness of the process in which they are

involved. Learners should not blindly accept the aspects of the target culture's worldview which they are exposed to in their learning process. Nevertheless, they must be open enough to use this alternate system of values and beliefs to question aspects of their own culture which they may have until now taken for granted. Bredella sums us this interpretation of intercultural understanding in the following way:

> "Intercultural understanding means that we can reconstruct the context of the foreign, take the others' perspective and see things through their eyes. This implies that we are able to distance ourselves from our own categories, values and interests." (Bredella, 2002: 39)

Such a definition of intercultural understanding moves away from the dangers of uncritical assimilation into the other culture and instead highlights the interaction between inner and outer perspectives. While learners can take on the inner perspective and see the target culture as members of that culture may see it, they also maintain their own outer perspective and therefore do not blindly accept the worldview of the target culture. Instead, it is expected that learners can achieve a 'third place' which reflects the impact which experiencing the target culture's perspective has had on their own values and worldview. Kramsch describes how language learning can help learners to achieve this third place between cultures:

> "From the clash between the familiar meanings of the native culture and the unexpected meanings of the target culture, meanings that were taken for granted are suddenly questioned, challenged, problematized. Learners have to construct their personal meanings at the boundaries between native speakers' meanings and their own everyday life." (1993: 238)

The concept of the 'third place' owes much to the description of the 'third domain' proposed by Bhabha (1994) as well as Bakhtin's notion of dialogism (1986). Kramsch (1993) sees the term as an alternative to the tendency in foreign language teaching to treat the home and foreign cultures as monolothic entities. She refers to the phrase "being on the fence," as being representative of the common belief that language learners are somehow located merely between two cultures. She criticises this term for ignoring the reality of differences in class, race, religion, and so forth, which are inherent in each of the two national cultures. Instead, Kramsch suggests that learners need to locate themselves in a place which "grows in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and new cultures he or she is being introduced to" (1993: 236).

Culture learning in the foreign language or Cultural Studies classroom therefore becomes a much more interactive and dialogic process which takes place both between learner and text and between home and target cultures. For Kramsch, the outcome of intercultural understanding is not a fixed 'comprehension' of the target culture. Instead, the learners' worldview is being constantly reconstructed, changed and adapted by contact with the other culture. This is in stark contrast to the unquestioning transfer of meaning which was seen to typify earlier approaches to culture learning. Instead of passively accepting the values and beliefs of the target culture which are present in the learning materials, Kramsch and others encourage learners to engage in a process of criticism and reflection which makes them more aware of alternative worldviews without necessarily accepting them. The outcome should also involve a growing awareness and questioning of the learners' own values and principles which until now they had taken for granted. (See Bach (2002) for further discussion on the theme of Kramsch's third place.)

Such an approach would appear to be both realistic and justifiable. If it is accepted that people speak and interact in different ways and that these differences reflect differences in values or differences in the hierarchies of values in their home cultures (Wierzbicka, 1991), then it is plausible learners need to be exposed to these values as well as to the language itself. Furthermore, the awareness of other values and perspectives must be accompanied by a ability to evaluate these critically. Byram takes this up in his model of intercultural communicative competence when he refers to 'critical cultural awareness'- which he describes as "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (1997a: 53). He includes the following objectives under this component:

 "The ability to:
- Identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one's own and other cultures
- Make an evaluative analysis of the documents and events which refers to an explicit perspective and criteria
- Interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges in accordance with explicit criteria, negotiating where necessary a degree of acceptance of those exchanges by drawing upon one's knowledge, skills and attitudes." (1997a: 53)

Although Byram never refers to the term 'third place' in the explanation of his model, this critical cultural awareness would appear to capture the essence of the concept by not requiring learners to adapt the values of the target culture, but rather to be aware of their own values and how they may influence their own behaviour. It is interesting to note that this self-reflective aspect of intercultural learning has taken on such importance in modern foreign language teaching that it can now be found in the aims of foreign language curricula in English secondary schools. The National Curriculum aims "to develop pupil's understanding of themselves and their own way of life" (DES 1990: 3 cited in Byram and Fleming, 1998: 4).

Apart from the concept of intercultural understanding, other general education aims are referred to within the literature of intercultural learning. Gnutzmann (1996: 63) outlines a curious mix of affective or humanistic objectives in his review of the literature. They include overcoming ethnocentrism, developing tolerance, accepting ethnicity, being open to new ideas, developing a rational way of dealing with conflict between cultures and, finally, being willing and able to change one's behavioural patterns. While none of these aims can be criticised, Gnutzmann (ibid) and House (1996) are perhaps justified in arguing that the general nature of these aims makes it questionable whether they should belong solely to the area of foreign language education. In the case of foreign languages, increased tolerance and acceptance of ethnicity may be some of the principles of intercultural language learning, but the discipline is hardly done a great service by stating the obvious. Erdmenger (1996) is an example of one of the many authors who adds affective aims when they do little more than state the obvious:

- "Beharrlichkeit und Ausdauer beim Lernen,
- Objektivität,
- Aufgeschlossenheit und Toleranz
- Verständigungsbereitschaft und Konfliktfähigkeit,
- Fähigkeit zum interkulturellen Zusammenleben." (1996: 47)

It is difficult to imagine any academic subjects which would not see the need for persistence, objectivity and an open and tolerant personality in their students. As such, attributing such goals to intercultural language learning risks overloading the subject and also taking away from its real contribution. As an alternative, Hu's description of the key aspects of intercultural learning as being slightly more practical and realistic

approach to integrating affective aims into the language classroom. Her understanding of intercultural learning can be summarised as follows:

- Awareness of link between language and culture
- Understanding of values and norms of target culture(s)
- Increased awareness of one's own norms (and those of others in one's own culture)
- Fundamental aspects of interculturalism – which include the nature of stereotypes and prejudice. (2000: 97)

This is a more practical approach than the aims described by Gnutzmann and Erdmenger as it establishes a clear link between affective aims and foreign language learning. The second and third points refer essentially to the awareness of inner and outer perspectives involved in intercultural understanding, while the final point refers to stereotypes and prejudice, two themes which have always been particularly relevant in the language classroom and which are often explicitly referred to in text books and other learning materials. Of course, this is far from being a complete model of intercultural learning. While it highlights the link between language and culture, the approach fails to mention the skills or knowledge which should accompany the affective aspects mentioned here. Nevertheless, this model does deal with the affective aspects in a way which is suited to the language classroom.

1.3.1.4 The Debate on the Affective Domain

Taking into account the weaknesses which can be seen in many of the descriptions of intercultural learning, it is not surprising that the importance attributed to intercultural understanding and other affective aims in the literature has not been received without criticism. In recent times, many writers have rejected what they see as an over-emphasis on these affective or general education aims as this has been at the expense of the more traditional linguistic or communicative aims of foreign language education. House (1996), Edmondson (1994) and Edmondson and House together (1998, 2000) have led this criticism. The criticism can be seen to have positive effects in so far as it has lead the research community to be more specific and realistic about what they hope intercultural approaches to language learning will bring about and how they believe this should be achieved. Reactions by Bredella (1999) and Hu (1999, 2000a, 2000b) to the points made by Edmondson and House have been particularly useful in highlighting the essential pedagogical beliefs which underlie intercultural learning.

Therefore, it is worth looking in more detail at the content of this debate and establishing whether language teachers can be justified in trying to develop their learners' intercultural understanding. I will begin by reviewing the arguments by Edmondson and House and then I will move on to the counter-arguments of Hu and others.

One of Edmondson and House's primary points of criticism is that the concept of intercultural learning contributes very little to the field of foreign language education. House (1996) describes intercultural learning as a "sinnentleertes Modewort" and Edmonson and House (1998) dismiss it even more strongly in the title of their paper as "ein überflussiger Begriff". They claim that the term has avoided definition until now because it is seen by some as a learning objective, by others as a learning process and still by others as a particular form of communication. They go on to question the usefulness of the term when all foreign language learning is, by definition, 'intercultural'. They also reject it as it has its origins in the 1970's discussion in Germany on multicultural classrooms and, as a result, it has led to communicative competence being overloaded with sociocultural objectives. The consequences of this for the authors is that the linguistic and skills aspects of foreign language learning has been played down in favour of an idealistic, affective perspective:

> "Sehr häufig wird interkulturelle Kompetenz rein affektiv-verhaltensorientiert gesehen und mit Aussagen wie 'die Fremde verstehen', 'Vorurteile abbauen', 'zu Toleranz fähig sein', 'ethnozentrische Sichtweisen vermeiden' usw. umschrieben." (House, 1996: 2)

Although they have nothing against such aims as such, Edmondson and House reject the tendency of allowing these aims to predominate over or replace the linguistic aspects of language learning and teaching. Both authors insist that the emphasis on affective aims lacks justification as there is no evidence which points to a transfer between the affective and linguistic domains. House refers to the research of Oller and Perkins (1978) which demonstrated that there was no relationship between learners having positive attitudes to the target culture (the affective domain) and being successful at learning the language (the cognitive and skill domains). From this, the authors reason that if making learners more tolerant or more positively inclined to the target culture is not helping them to become better language speakers, then there is little justification for focussing on such affective aims in the language classroom. They then

conclude that if the emphasis is taken away from the affective aims, the term 'intercultural learning' will inevitably become irrelevant:

> "Wenn wir nun den Begriff 'interkulturelle Kompetenz' ohne diese emotionale Einstellungskomponente begreifen, dann – so glaube ich – brauchen wir ihn eigentlich nicht mehr, denn eine umfassende verstandene kommunikative kompetenz beinhaltet alles andere, was man mit interkultureller Kompetenz dann noch meinen kann." (House, 1996: 4)

To support this point, House points out that the close relationship between language and culture had already been the area of study by sociocultural and pragmatic-functional approaches such as those proposed by the Prague Linguists and the British contextualists. She suggests that instead of focussing at 'intercultural learning', communicative language teaching should be understood as "Sprache in Funktion in Situation in Kultur" (1996: 5), thereby taking into account both the micro (situational) and macro (cultural) contexts of language use. While House does recognise the need for cultural *awareness*, it is not in the vague sense of attitudes, but rather in close connection to language awareness and how linguistic aspects of communication are culturally influenced or determined. The authors' own approach reflects this strict interpretation of how culture should be dealt with in the foreign language classroom. It involves making contrastive discourse analyses of two languages (in this case German and English), in order to study how elements of interaction such as speech acts and discourse phases are realised differently in both languages and how these differences can have consequences for intercultural communication. Based on her research, House (1996, 2000) presents five dimensions of cross-cultural differences between the discourse styles employed by German and Anglophone speakers:

Orientation towards Content--------------------------Orientation towards Addressee
Orientation towards Self ----------------------------- Orientation towards Other
Directness   ------------------------------ Indirectness
Explicitness   ------------------------------ Implicitness
Ad Hoc Formulation   ------------------------------ Verbal Routines (2000: 162)

The author emphasises that these are not clear-cut dichotomies, but rather end-points in a continuum in which German speakers tend to locate themselves on the left-hand while English speakers would be on the right.

The responses to the arguments of Edmondson and House have focussed mainly on their strict focus on the linguistic aspects of culture (as seen in the table above) and also on their tendency to use dichotomies such as 'affective versus communicative aims' and 'German versus Anglophone speakers'. Hu, publishing her arguments in both English and German language publications, rejects their application of cultural awareness only to linguistic aspects of language by explaining that language and culture are now seen to be so closely connected that it is no longer possible to talk about language without taking into account aspects such as cultural identity, power and situational conditionality (2000a: 91) and that it is therefore justified and necessary to deal with cultural norms, values and premises in the language classroom (2000b: 135). As regards Edmondson and House's own contrastive discourse approach, Hu is particularly critical. She points out that the "traditional equation of culture, language and nation" (2000a: 93) is no longer accepted in current foreign language teaching literature due to the complex, multicultural identities of modern countries and she therefore questions the value of studies which contrast homogeneous 'German' and 'Anglo-American' discourse styles:

> "Es ist gerade diese Art und Weise von Kultur Kontrastivitat, die ich im Kontext von interkulturellem Lernen für problematisch halte. Die aufgrund der nationstatlichen Orientierung der traditionellen Fremdsprachendidaktik in der Tat verwurzelte Vorstellung von Kulturen als homogener, mehr oder weniger monolingualer, objektiv beschreibbarer kollektiver Entitaten, die man miteinander kontrastieren kann, ist der heutigen Gesellschaft und insbesonderer der jungen Generation nicht mehr angemessen." (2000b: 134)

Bredella and Delanoy (1999: 1) challenge Edmondson and House's point that all foreign language education is, by definition, intercultural, or that the term 'intercultural language learning' is in any way redundant. If this was the case, they argue, then audio-lingual and communicative language teaching would also be tautologies. But this is not so, as communicative language teaching had raised awareness that language teaching until its emergence had failed to be sufficiently communicative and this therefore led to changes in methods and content. The same, they claim, can be said for intercultural learning, which has brought about a stronger focus on the cultural aspects of foreign language learning. Bredella and Delanoy go on to challenge the suggestion that intercultural perspectives on foreign language education will be at the cost of the other linguistic and communicative aims:

"Er lenkt den Blick vielmehr nur darauf, dass wir beim Fremdsprachenlehren und –lernen darauf Rucksicht nehmen müssen, dass die Lernenden die fremde Sprache und Kultur aus ihrer eigenen Perspektive wahrnehmen und dass es daher darauf ankommt, diese Differenz nicht zu überspielen, sondern ins Bewusstsein zu heben." (1999: 11)

In other words, Edmondson and House's argumentation fails to take into account the issue of intercultural understanding and that language learning involves contact and interaction between two different worldviews. Learners need to be made aware that they judge behaviour based on their own values and that these values are in no way natural or God-given. This, argue Bredella and Delanoy, is the contribution of intercultural language learning. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to suggest that the model of pragmalinguistics proposed by House (see above) is a sufficient way of dealing with the role of culture in language and language learning. Although they may be subjects which are difficult to tie down and evaluate, learners' attitudes and their interest in foreign cultures are elements which need to be taken into account when dealing with foreign language education:

"Der Blick der Fremdsprachendidaktik ist weiter als der der Pragmalinguistik, weil sie die Fremdsprachenlerner mit ihren Interessen, Motivationen und Wertvorstellungen über die fremde Sprache und Kultur miteinbezieht und weil sie sich auch Gedanken darüber machen muß, wie das Fremdsprachenlernen die Einstellungen der Lernenden zur eigenen und fremden Kultur verändert." (Bredella, 1999: 104)

It is important to highlight one further point in response of the criticism of intercultural learning which seems to have been overlooked in the publications dealt with here. It has been shown that one of Edmondson and Houses' key criticisms of intercultural learning was that there was no positive relationship between positive attitudes towards the target culture and the learners' language ability (1998: 177). However, it is unfortunate that Edmondson and House chose to equate the affective aims of intercultural learning with merely 'positive attitudes towards the target culture' because, as was pointed out earlier, current models of intercultural learning and intercultural competence require much more than simply developing positive attitudes. Learners are required to develop attitudes of curiosity and openness (Byram, 1997a) as well as achieving the cultural awareness or 'intercultural understanding' as outlined by Bredella (2002). Whether such attitudes and understanding transfer easily to the linguistic domain, is, arguably, irrelevant. Rather, they should be considered an integrative part of language learning, as the linguistic skills traditionally associated with

language learning cannot be effectively employed without the understanding and awareness which intercultural learning refers to. For language learners to communicate successfully with members of other cultures they need more than traditional communicative skills. They need to be sufficiently open to understand other cultural interpretations of speech acts and behaviour and they need to be able to negotiate compromises when interpretations differ radically. These are affective or humanistic traits but will influence the success with which learners employ their communicative skills.

1.3.2 The Cognitive Domain: Knowledge

The role of knowledge in language and culture learning may not be as hotly disputed as the question of affective aims, but this does not mean that there is any great clarity as to what it should involve. Susan Bassnett recently wrote: "One of the fundamental questions that continues to preoccupy theorists in foreign language learning is: what kind of knowledge is required for an understanding of another culture?" (1997: xvii) She admits that there is little consensus to this question. It was seen earlier in section 1.1 that many of the earlier approaches to culture learning had focussed principally on factual, declarative knowledge about the target culture (Brooks, 1960; Nostrand, 1974). However, writers such as Moore (1991 cited in Paige et. al.) criticise these approaches for various reasons. Firstly, they concentrated on surface-level behaviour as opposed to looking at the values upon which this behaviour was based. Secondly, the approaches are guilty of ignoring variety within each cultural community and, thirdly, of failing to take into account the interaction between language and culture in the creation of meaning.

While these criticisms are no doubt justified, a review of the literature would appear to suggest that in recent times there has been a sort of pendulum swing away from cultural knowledge and that writers have chosen, to a great extent, to avoid dealing with the issues of cognitive knowledge all together. Instead, they have focussed on the importance of affective issues (seen in section 1.2.1) or the skills necessary to engage in intercultural communication. Due to its failure to provide all the answers to culture learning in the past, factual knowledge has become 'the ugly step-sister' of Bloom's three domains. It is perhaps easier to avoid the problem of identifying what factual knowledge language learners need by suggesting that learners do not need knowledge in

itself, but rather the appropriate skills and attitudes to attain it on their own. Dlaska, for example, says that culture learning "encourages learners to develop certain skills in dealing with a new language and culture rather than providing them with a complete description of a given culture" (2000: 253). However, Baron (2002) argues that this does not mean that 'factual' cultural information should be ignored completely in the foreign language classroom. Presenting and working with factual information about the target culture in the classroom is a vital part of the teachers' task if they wish to develop intercultural communicative competence in their learners. However, the question remains: what type of knowledge should this be?

Roche (2001) offers several reasons why choosing the appropriate cultural content is not as evident as it might appear. Topics should be interesting and motivating, he explains, but they should not be so emotionally loaded that they distract learners from the main aims of the lesson. Secondly, while it is common to choose a range of topics that are 'universal to all humanity' and therefore lend themselves to cross-cultural comparison, he warns that such lists often carry a Western bias and give priority to themes which are considered important in American or European cultures. A list of 'universal' themes drawn up by some from another culture may reveal alternative considerations of what is considered important and not important. Finally, Roche points out that choosing a selection of themes based on the expected interests of the learner can also be problematic. He reports on a study carried out at the University of Columbia which showed that many 'up-to-date' topics in current textbooks (such as environmental issues and AIDS) were not considered by students to be of any great interest or relevance to their lives (2001: 172).

Despite such issues, Byram *et. al.* (1994) insist that "it would be misguided to assume that learners do not need some 'background' information" (1994: 48) and propose the following list of analytical categories of cultural knowledge:

- "Social identity and social groups: groups within the nation-state which are the basis for other than national identity, including social class, regional identity, ethnic minority, professional identity, and which illustrate the complexity of individuals' social identity and of a national society;
- Social interaction: conventions of verbal and non-verbal behaviour in social interaction at differing levels of familiarity, as outsider and insider within social groups;

- Belief and behaviour: routine and taken-for-granted actions within a social group – national or sub-national – and the moral and religious beliefs which are embodied within them; secondly, routines of behaviour taken from daily life which are not seen as significant markers of the identity of the group;
- Socio-political institutions: institutions of the state – and the values and meanings which they embody – which characterise the state and its citizens and which constitute a framework for ordinary, routine life within the national and sub-national groups; provision for health-care, for law and order, for social security, for local government, etc.
- Socialisation and the life-cycle: institutions of socialisation – families, schools, employment, religion, military service – and the ceremonies which mark passage through stages in life; representation of divergent practices in different social groups as well as national auto-stereotypes of expectations and shared interpretations;
- National history: periods and events, historical and contemporary, which are significant in the constitution of the nation and its identity – both actually significant and, not necessarily identical, perceived as such by its members;
- National geography: geographical factors within the national boundaries which are significant in members' perceptions of their country ; other factors which are information (known but not significant to members) essential to outsiders in intercultural communication (NB national boundaries and changes in them are part of 'national history');
- National cultural heritage: cultural artefacts perceived to be emblems and embodiments of national culture from the past and the present…
- Stereotypes and national identity: for example, German and English notions of what is typically German and English national identity, the origins of these notions – historical and contemporary – and comparisons among them; symbols of national identities and stereotypes and their meanings, e.g. famous monuments and people." (1994: 51)

Various aspects of these categories are worthy of further exploration. First of all, Byram points out that it should be the knowledge and perceptions of members of the target group (i.e. the 'insider perspective') which should make up the content of these categories. For example, it should be the aspects of a nation's geography and history which are considered important by members of that nation (and not those chosen by dispassionate geographers and historians) which are included in the sections 'national history' and 'national geography'. The relevance which an English person would attribute to the battle of Hastings is therefore considered more important for the EFL learner than a historian's analysis of the battle.

Secondly, this model deals with the three weaknesses which were common to earlier models of culture learning: the focus on surface-level behaviour, the separation of language and culture and the neglect of variation within national cultures (Moore, 1991). The section 'social interaction' takes into account the important link between

culture and language and how this may manifest itself in aspects verbal and non-verbal behaviour as well as in register. The section 'socio-political institutions' not only deals with 'surface level' factual information about how the target culture functions politically, but also makes specific reference to the values which underlie these institutions - "the values and meanings which they [the institutions] embody" (1994: 51). Finally, the category 'social identity and social groups' highlights the need to look at variety and difference within the national culture, whether this reveals itself in social, ethnic or regional divergence.

Many other writers have also attributed increased importance to developing learners' knowledge of how language and culture are inextricably connected. The issue is considered particularly relevant in the current educational context where culture learning is less interested in culture as background knowledge for the study of literature, but rather in the role which it plays in influencing intercultural communication. Many educators have taken up the concept of *languaculture*, coined by the anthropologist Michael Agar, to describe the relationship between language and culture:

> "Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture…whenever you hear the word language or the word culture, you might wonder about the missing half…*Languaculture* is a reminder, I hope, of the necessary connection between its two parts." (1994: 28, 60)

Aspects of *languaculture* which are considered important for foreign language learners include cultural differences in politeness styles, norms of interaction and the realisation of speech acts (Bouton, 1999; House, 1996; House and Kasper, 2000; Judd, 1999; Rose, 1999 and Spencer-Oatey, 2000). The different cultural interpretations of lexical items (Sercu, 1998) and non-verbal communication (Byram, 1997a) are also seen as relevant in the foreign language learning process.

In his model of intercultural communicative competence, Byram divides the cultural knowledge which language learners need into two broad categories. These are, firstly, knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in both the home and target cultures; and secondly, knowledge of processes of interaction at individual and societal levels (1997a: 35). The objectives related to this knowledge are the following:

"Knowledge of / about:

- Historical and contemporary relationships between one's own and one's interlocutor's countries.
- The means of achieving contact with interlocutors from another country (at a distance or in proximity), of travel to and from and the institutions which facilitate contact or help resolve problems.
- The types of cause and process of misunderstanding between interlocutors of different cultural origins.
- The national memory of one's own country and how its events are related to and seen from the perspective of one's interlocutor's country.
- The national memory of one's interlocutor's country and the perspectives on it from one's own country.
- National definitions of geographical space in one's own country and how these are perceived from the perspective of other countries.
- National definitions of geographical space in one's interlocutor's country and the perspectives on them from one's own.
- The processes and institutions of socialisation in one's own and one's interlocutor's country.
- Social distinctions and their principal markers, in one's own country and one's interlocutor's.
- Institutions and perceptions of them which impinge on daily life in one's own and one's interlocutor's country and which conduct and influence relationships between them.
- The processes of social interaction in one's interlocutor's country." (Byram, 1997a: 51)

Two characteristics of these objectives stand out from previous models of cultural knowledge. Firstly, the knowledge described here in primarily relational and focuses on the relationship between the home and target cultures. The model emphasises the need for learners to be aware of the historical relationship between the two cultures and how, for example, the national memory of one culture may be viewed from the other perspective. The objectives therefore require learners to have a good knowledge of many aspects of their own culture in order to be able to engage with the target culture successfully. The second interesting characteristic is the importance which the model attributes to *languaculture.* Both the third and final objectives refer to the cultural differences in communication style and how aspects such as proxemics, non-verbal communication and taboo topics may influence the outcome of intercultural communication

Kramer (1997) proposes a more theoretical approach to what objects of study should be incorporated into British Cultural Studies classroom. This is, of course, more suited to specific courses in Cultural Studies than to the concept of culture learning in

foreign language classes. He suggests that Cultural Studies courses should take various principles into consideration when planning the content of classes. These will now be outlined briefly. First of all, cultural knowledge should involve issues and themes which are of contemporary relevance to the foreign culture. However, as not all themes can be covered in one course, it is necessary for learners to learn to draw conclusions from concrete examples: "Am konkreten Beispiel wird das Paradigma gelernt" (1997: 75). Secondly, the knowledge acquired by the student should include the historical dimension of the chosen themes so that students can understand the contemporary situation in a larger context and thereby be better able to interpret it. Thirdly, classes should take various theoretical approaches so that students are exposed to alternative interpretations (for example, Structuralist and Marxist analyses) of the themes in question. Finally, classes should take into account the many different modes of communication which are employed in a culture to represent the different themes. Students should be exposed not only to texts, but also to film, musical scores, theatre and dance. Kramer's model is outlined in the graph below in fig. 1.1.

Apart from the third principle which may be too complex for this context, there is no reason why this model can not be a useful guide to the choice of cultural knowledge in the foreign language classroom as well as in the area of Cultural Studies. Foreign language teachers, like their colleagues in Cultural Studies, need to find themes which are representative of modern society, but also need to give learners to information about the historical context which lead to the cultural product or practice having the meaning it has in its current context. Language teachers must also be prepared to expose their learners to different modes of communication such as film extracts, music and theatre in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the target culture. While foreign language education may not try to engage their learners in theoretical analyses of the themes in the target culture, it does encourage different readings of cultural texts by stressing the importance of the readers' 'outsider' interpretation.

Empire: Britain, Europe and their Others	Processes of Modernisation	Social Development/ Systems	Identity Formation
	Migration(s)		...
RE/CONSTRUCTIONS OF HISTORY		**THEORIES & (RELATED) METHODS OF**	
Formation of the modern nation state; establishing civil society	Contemporary Britain: processes of re-structuring	Cultural Analysis	Signification
	...		...

CLASS, GENDER, GENERATION, 'RACE'/ ETHNICITY, LOCALITY, NATION/REGION ...

Polity & Power: Democracy versus *Ancien Régime*	Production & Consumption (Work & Leisure)	Texts	Pictures; Film, TV
THEMES & TOPICS		**MODES OF COMMUNICATION**	
Making sense of one's life: generating meaning	Families, Households, Communities	Musical Scores	Movements: Theatre, Dance

Fig. 1.1: Kramer's content of Cultural Studies (1997: 77)

Of course, as Byram points out, it is impossible for teachers to "have or anticipate all the knowledge which learners might at some point need" (2002: 12). For this reason, learners also need procedural knowledge (i.e. skills) and attitudes which will facilitate them in acquiring and interpreting further information about the target culture. These skills will be looked at in the following section.

1.3.3 The Skills Domain

It has been shown in the previous sections that intercultural communicative competence is constituted of knowledge, attitudes and other aspects of affective learning, the most important of these being identified as intercultural understanding. However, it is clear that in order to gain declarative knowledge about the foreign culture and to develop an understanding of alternative cultural perspectives (i.e. intercultural understanding), it is necessary for learners to have the appropriate skills. These are skills which are not necessarily part of a native speaker's communicative competence (Byram, 1999) as intercultural interaction is quite different than communication between speakers from the same culture. More accurately, the skills of intercultural communicative competence are similar to those employed by ethnographers in order to engage in "…the study of a group's social and cultural practices from an insider's perspective" (Roberts et. al., 2001). However, writers are often quite vague about what these skills actually are. Meyer's definition of intercultural competence is focussed heavily on an issue of interaction, but it lacks a concrete description of the communicative skills which are inherent in the term:

> "Intercultural competence... identifies the ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures. Adequacy and flexibility imply an awareness of the cultural differences between one's own and the foreign culture and the ability to handle cross-cultural problems which result from these differences." (1990: 137)

The author refers to the ability to behave suitably in situations of intercultural contact and also mentions the ability to handle cross-cultural communication problems, but the specific skills which are necessary to achieve this type of behaviour are not clear from the definition. Unfortunately, this appears to be a common problem. In much of the literature reviewed here, the skills of intercultural communicative competence are often presented in such a vague manner that they do not lend themselves to adaptation by the teaching community. Paige *et. al.* (2000), for example, in their conceptual model of culture learning, present skills with general and vague titles such as "culture learning strategies", "intercultural perspective taking skills", "transcultural competence" and "intercultural communicative competence" (2000: 5). No attempt is made to explain what these terms refer to, even though many of them are quite general and open to

different interpretation. In particular, it is questionable whether such overarching terms such as "transcultural competence" and "intercultural communicative competence", which have been shown elsewhere (Byram, 1997a; Meyer, 1990) to include a mixture of attitudes, knowledge and skills can actually be described merely as skills. Paige et. al.'s list of 'culture specific' or 'target culture skills' is equally perplexing and unclear. The list is made up of two components which are:

- Little 'c' behaviour –appropriate everyday behaviour
- Big 'C' behaviour – appropriate contextual behaviour (2000: 5)

In this case, it is unclear how 'behaviour' can be equated with 'skills'. Does the skill involve being able to identify little 'c' and big 'C' behaviour? Or should learners have the skill of being able to take on this behaviour? Or should they simply be able to understand the values and principles which underlie it? Unfortunately, the answer is missing from the publication, which otherwise offers an extensive overview of teacher and learner variables and assessment in foreign language–based culture learning.

Erdmenger's overview of aims for foreign-language-based *Landeskunde* also includes a section on skills. However, instead of looking at skills which are specifically related to intercultural communication, the author merely highlights elements of the four linguistic skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) which have culturally specific semantic or pragmatic aspects. For example, Erdmenger discusses the different socio-pragmatic implications of the phrases "Open the window", "Open the window, please" and "Could you open the window?" (1996: 44). By ignoring skills which are particular to intercultural communication, the author neglects the learners' need to become more autonomous language learners and to be able to deal with new information which they encounter in and outside of their language and Cultural Studies classes.

Other writers have proposed more precise descriptions of what skills learners need to engage in intercultural communication. These can be essentially based on the belief that successful intercultural communication depends on, firstly, ascertaining the cultural perspectives of one's interlocutor and secondly, having established the two different cultural perspectives, being able to negotiate meaning and establish a relationship of trust and respect with the interlocutor.

Neuner (2000), citing Bimmel (1996), illustrates these two basic skills of intercultural learning when he suggests that learners need to be trained in the strategies of finding information, listening and observing (i.e. ascertaining the foreign perspective) as well as "strategies for arriving at the meaning, for 'trading meanings', for working out the contexts, norms and values 'behind the words'"(2000: 46) (i.e. negotiating meaning between the two cultural perspectives and establishing a relationship with the interlocutor). Similarly, Zeuner emphasises the need for learners to be able to discover the foreign understanding of products and practices when he refers to the skill of asking 'search questions' ("Suchfragen" (1999: 41)). He also refers to the ability to engage in metacommunication, which refers to the skills of being able to analyse intercultural situations and to identify what may have led to a lack of clarity or misunderstandings in these situations.

In his model of intercultural competence, Byram puts forward two sets of skills, which reflect the two general categories mentioned above. These are, firstly, the skills of interpreting and relating and secondly, the skills of discovery and interaction. The first set of skills refer to the ability to identify the underlying values and perspectives in a document or event, while the second set deals with the learners' ability to acquire new information about the target culture, as well as the ability to interact successfully with members of that culture. The objectives which he proposes for each of these set of skills are the following:

"Skills of interpreting and relating: Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own.

Objectives (ability to):
- Identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document of event and explain their origins;
- Identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present;
- Mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena.

Skills of discovery and interaction: Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

Objectives (ability to):

- Elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of a document or events and to develop an explanatory system susceptible of application to other phenomena;
- Identify significant reference within and across cultures and elicit their significance and connotations;
- Identify similar and dissimilar processes of interaction, verbal and non-verbal, and negotiate an appropriate use of them in specific circumstances;
- Use in real-time an appropriate combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes to interact with interlocutors from a different country and culture, taking into consideration the degree of one's existing familiarity with the country and culture and the extent of difference between one's own and the other;
- Identify contemporary and past relationships between one's own and the other culture and country;
- Identify and make use of public and private institutions which facilitate contact with other countries and cultures;
- Use in real-time knowledge, skills and attitudes for mediation between interlocutors of one's own and a foreign culture." (1997a: 52/53)

It becomes clear from these descriptions that intercultural skills are, effectively, the active application of intercultural understanding (Bredella, 2000, 2002) to situations of contact with the target culture. It was seen that intercultural understanding was the ability to see other cultural perspectives and to subsequently adjust one's own perspective due to exposure to this contact. By using the skills of interpreting and relating, learners have to use the understanding which they have achieved of the foreign perspective to explain misunderstandings "in terms of each of the cultural systems present" and to find compromise between "conflicting interpretations of phenomena" (1997a: 52). Similarly, the skills of discovery and interaction involve discovering the other cultural perspective ("Elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of a document" (1997a: 52)) and then negotiating meaning between both these world-views.

It is interesting to examine what Byram and other writers expect to be the outcomes of applying these skills to situations of intercultural contact. Byram refers to using the skills to identify the different cultural perspectives and then to 'mediate' between them, but it is not clear in this original publication what should be the outcome of this 'mediation'. How does one deal with two conflicting interpretations in a situation, whether they are due to cultural background or other reasons? In a later publication, Byram suggests that identifying how the different cultural systems are causing different interpretations and misunderstanding can be sufficient to 'solve' the breakdown in communication: "an intercultural speaker…is able to identify and explain the pre-suppositions in a statement in order to reduce the dysfunction they cause" (1999: 368).

Byram is not suggesting that one perspective should give way or be corrected by the other. Instead, the skills of intercultural competence help interlocutors to recognise, understand and respect alternative perspectives.

A short example may help to illustrate this point. English native speakers who come into contact with German speakers often report feeling annoyed or intimidated by the common German statement "I have a question" which often precedes German requests for information in English. While this may sound demanding and self-centred to English speakers, this comes from the German "Ich habe eine Frage" which in German is perceived as a polite *warning* of the upcoming request for information. An English *intercultural speaker* with the appropriate cultural knowledge, skills of ICC and sufficient intercultural understanding would be able to identify this alternative perspective on the German behaviour and would therefore not perceive it in a negative way as a *normal* native speaker might.

Not all authors would appear to agree with Byram's approach however. Savignon and Sysoyev (2002) wrote recently of their attempts to train learners in what they describe as 'sociocultural strategies'. The definition which they provide of these strategies implies that these are in many ways equivalent to the intercultural skills referred to by others: According to the authors, sociocultural strategies are "techniques useful for establishing and maintaining international contact in a spirit of peace and a dialogue of cultures" (2002: 512). Not only is their definition of sociocultural strategies similar to that used by others to describe intercultural skills, but the content of these skills/strategies is also quite similar. However, their strategies would suggest that they do not see the solution to how to mediate between different cultural perspectives as being the same as that suggested by Byram and Kramsch. Savignon and Sysoyev suggest that intercultural dialogue should be maintained, for example, by "redirecting a discussion to a more neutral topic" and by "dissimulation of personal views to avoid potential conflict" (2002: 513). In other words, when there is a risk of a clash of cultural perspectives, the intercultural speaker should employ the tactics of changing the topic or simply hiding one's own cultural viewpoint.

It could be argued that such an approach never actually achieves the aims of intercultural communication. Learners should be able to negotiate between different

points of view and not simply learn how to suppress these in order to avoid conflict. By identifying different interpretations and engaging in 'meta-talk' about them, learners stand a much better chance of developing interest and tolerance for cultural difference. On the other hand, training learners how to avoid misunderstanding and dysfunction in intercultural interaction will achieve nothing but offering an illusion that cultural difference do not exist.

1.3.4 Central Characteristics of Intercultural Learning

So far, this chapter has presented an overview of the development of language-culture learning and has described how an intercultural approach has emerged, basing itself on the model of the intercultural speaker. Various interpretations of what intercultural learning means have been looked at and an attempt has been made to identify the key tendencies or principles among the many aims and objectives of intercultural learning which have been put forward in the literature. In summary, the following key elements of intercultural learning can be identified:

- Language learning cannot be separated from culture learning as language manifests many of the social actions of a society and expresses the values and beliefs which underlie these actions.

- Although cultures continue, to a great extent, to be equated with nations, increased importance is attributed to variation within cultures and the fact that each individual has a number of 'cultures' and identities.

- By culture learning, the social studies' sense of culture "the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community" (Kramsch, 1996: 2) is seen as more appropriate than the humanities' tradition of focussing on history, literature and social institutions. These aspects are also seen as relevant, however it is their meaning and significance in the target culture and not the products and practices themselves which are attributed importance.

- The central aims of intercultural learning are seen as being able to interact successfully and establish relationships with members of the other culture(s) and to understand (in as much as this is possible) how members of other cultures see and interpret the world. Intercultural learning is therefore understood as an interactive and as a personally transforming process.

- As a result of learning about another culture, learners are expected to take a more critical and distanced view on their own culture and to come to an understanding that there can be no one universal way of understanding or interpreting cultural behaviour.

1.4 Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence

Taking into account the central principles and key characteristics of intercultural learning as well as the overview of models and proposals which was carried out earlier, Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997a) will be taken as the basic point of reference for the research in the following chapters of this study. There are various reasons for this choice. Firstly, the model (summarised below in Figure 1.2) offers a comprehensive approach that deals with the skills, attitudes, knowledge and awareness which have been seen to constitute intercultural learning. Secondly, Byram's main work on the model offers not only objectives for each of the components, but also suggests modes of assessment for each part. Such elaboration on the model facilitates the teacher and action researcher's task of operationalising and putting the model into practice in the classroom. Finally, the model has already been put into use extensively in foreign language classrooms and as such has become a common point of reference in the literature on intercultural language learning, thereby confirming its relevance and practicality. Classroom practice and research which have been carried out using the model, at least to a certain extent, as a source of aims and assessment include Belz (2003), Byram (1999), Duffy and Mayes (2001), Woodin (2001) and Müller-Hartmann (1999a).

A further aspect of Byram's model is worthy of note at this stage. As can be seen in figure 1.2, Byram differentiates between 'intercultural competence' which refers to the ability to communicate with members of other cultures *in one's own language*, and intercultural *communicative* competence which implies the same ability but using a foreign language (1997a: 71). Hence intercultural communicative competence requires linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence in the foreign language, along with the attitudes, skills, knowledge and awareness of the other term. For the rest of this study the example of many other authors will be followed and both terms will be used interchangeably. However, as the students involved in my classes operated for the most part in their target languages, it can be assumed that it was their intercultural *communicative* competence which was being developed.

Finally, the model presented below also makes reference to the three learning environments where intercultural communicative competence can be developed, i.e. in

the classroom, through fieldwork and through independent learning. The focus in this thesis will be on the classroom and, in a virtual sense, on fieldwork. (In the diagram, the author uses French terms to refer to the elements of ICC. *Savoirs* refers to knowledge, *savoir comprendre* refers to skills of interpreting and relation, *savoir apprendre/ faire* refers to the skills of discovery and interaction*, savoir s'engager* to critical cultural awareness and *savoir etre* to the attitudes of curiosity and openness.)
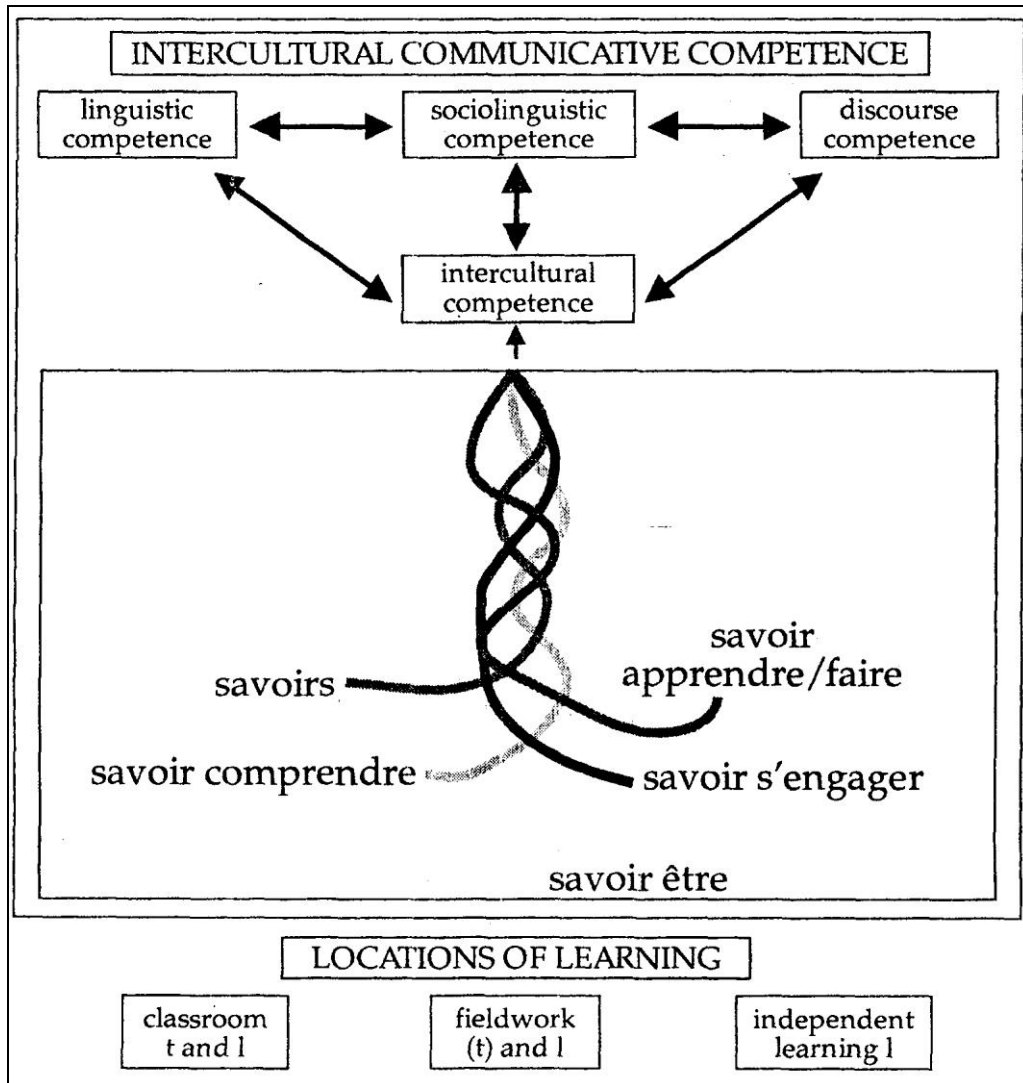
Fig. 1.2: Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997a: 73)

1.4.1 Materials and Methods

The question now arises: If ICC is to be the central goal of foreign language education, how should this goal be achieved? Celia Roberts (2002) confirms what has been shown in the previous sections, when she states that the term intercultural learning can mean very different things to different people. She also points out that there are many different opinions about what methods should be used in the classroom to engage learners in intercultural learning. However, there does appear to be a great degree of consensus in the literature on the general failure of textbooks to deal adequately with the sociocultural aspects of language learning in general and the development of ICC in particular. The following subsection will explore why this is the case.

1.4.1.1 Foreign Language Textbooks and Intercultural Learning

Criticism of the treatment of culture in foreign language textbooks is not a new development. In their review of how EFL textbooks in the 1980's were dealing with the cultural element, Clarke and Clarke complained that publications were plagued with racial, gender and regional stereotyping and that this was leading to a devaluing of "women, black Britons, and those living north of Shakespeare's birthplace" (1990: 35). They also found cross-cultural comparison to be rare in textbooks of the time, but when this did take place, it usually involved a comparison of an idealised version of Britain with a realistic 'warts-and –all' version of the learners' home culture. This usually meant that the home culture came out looking badly from the comparison. Unlike Clarke and Clarke, Risager (1990) found that the range of social groups presented in textbooks of the time did include a wide spread of social and professional groups, age groups and nationalities. However, she does criticise textbooks for adopting what she describes as a 'post-modernist' approach which resulted in bright pictures, fragmented and superficial depictions of the target culture and a neglect of the historical dimension. She also points out that the social functions of the learner in the modern textbook are reduced to that of the tourist, visitor and customer (1991: 189). This criticism is echoed by Moore (1991) who found in her study of textbooks for Spanish as a foreign language that the Spanish and South American cultures were represented in a fragmented fashion which was too general to provide an accurate insight into these countries.

More recent critiques of cultural issues in foreign language textbooks and teaching materials focus less on the portrayal of the target cultures, but rather on their attempts to pass off certain western values and communication style as being universal. Gray argues that, even in an era when textbooks often aim to avoid culture specific material, then still continue to be "highly wrought cultural constructs and carriers of cultural messages" (2002: 152). The author claims that in an attempt not to insult possible buyers in different cultures, textbook authors have diligently avoided many possibly controversial topics in their products and have created a bland version of the target culture which can appeal to all. (The author explains that the acronym PARSNIP is used by many publishers to outline the topics which authors should not bring up in their materials – politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms and pork.) This has resulted, argues Gray, in the target culture being stripped of many of its important characteristics. The alternative world presented in EFL textbooks, according to the author, is 'cosmopolitan' and 'aspirational' and content is based on a fantasy world of spending money on luxury goods, going on international trips and discussing pop stars. All of this is of little use to learners who need help in dealing with the hard realities of daily life in the target culture:

> "While it is undeniable that students need scripts it could also be argued that they need exposure to a much wider range than those available in most course books. Students in many learning situations may have problems with visas, need part-time jobs, or have difficulties renting accommodation as well as wanting to know how to enthuse over each other's clothes." (2002: 161)

His research also found that many teachers wished for material which took into account the students' local culture as well as the target culture. These 'glocal textbooks' (2002: 165) would provide, for example, texts which showed learners how their home culture was being depicted in the media of the target culture.

Other critics of communicative learning materials have pointed out that the 'communicative skills' which are often at the centre of modern textbooks and ESP language materials are themselves culturally specific to western nations and, as such, are not appropriate for all learners. Cameron (2002) argues that culturally specific genres and speech styles are often presented to learners as if they were somehow natural and 'acultural' and that they would in some way facilitate more effective

communication between people in any culture and in any situation. However, the reality is that many of these communication rules are essentially those of the white middle classes in the United States. Learners are encouraged to speak directly, to speak positively instead of being argumentative, and to share their feelings instead of being silent and reserved (2002: 68). In this way, the author claims that even in a skill-based curriculum which tries to avoid cultural content, the English language teaching profession (especially in the area of courses in Business 'communication skills') continues to risk engaging in an indirect form of Anglo-American imperialism:

> "I know of no case in which the communicative norms of a non-Western, or indeed non-Anglophone society have been exported by expert consultants. Finns do not run workshops for British businesses on the virtues of talking less, Japanese are not invited to instruct Americans in speaking indirectly. The discourse of 'global' communication is not a case of post-modern 'hypbridity' or 'fusion'." (2002: 70)

While there may be much criticism of how culture is dealt with in textbooks, there are also many suggestions and guidelines for improving the situation. In their review of modern textbooks, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) make a series of proposals for the better integration of culture learning into textbooks. Firstly, they call for teachers not to treat the cultural content of textbooks as simply a source of cultural information which is to be comprehended and learned by students. Instead, teachers should use information about the target culture in their textbooks as something to encourage dialogue and interaction in the classroom. The authors believe that there should be a constant interaction between the cultural perspectives brought to the classroom by the teacher, the learners and by the textbook. Secondly, the authors call for a broader range of cultural content in textbooks. Textbooks, they explain, often fail to provide the historical context of products and practices and regularly avoid negative aspects of the target culture, such as racism and unemployment. Finally, textbooks should include explicit intercultural elements, such as texts which discuss different cultural interpretations of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour.

Sercu (1998) proposes the following questions to guide teachers in evaluating the cultural content of textbooks:
- "What image is represented: a royal or a realistic one?

- Does the textbook only present a tourist point of view? Tourism-oriented textbooks only discuss situations which are marginal to the ordinary everyday situations members of the foreign culture find themselves in.
- Are negative and problematic aspects of the foreign culture touched upon?
- Does the textbook offer an authentic reflection of the multicultural character of the foreign society?
- Do situations occur in which someone with a good mastery of the foreign language is not understood because of differences in culture-specific reference frames?
- Are teachers and learners encouraged to consult additional materials on the topics dealt with or do the textbook authors present the information in their books as the true and only picture of the foreign culture?
- Do the textbooks include materials/texts written by members of the different nationalities living in the foreign country of do they merely present the white male point of view?
- Are mentality, values, ideas dealt with?
- Is a historical perspective presented and used to explain certain present-day features of mentality or national character?
- Is the information on the foreign culture integrated in the course or is it added at the end of every chapter or even presented in a separate chapter at the end of the book?" (1998: 273)

This checklist is useful as it provides an overview of many of the common failings of textbooks with regards to culture and it also indirectly suggests what a textbook aimed at developing ICC might look like. First of all, teachers are encouraged to look for a textbook which represents a realistic version of the target culture. This version will acknowledge a culture's social problems and will provide a representative overview of the social and ethnic make-up of the population as opposed to simply portraying a society which is exclusively white and middle-class. Secondly, the need to locate the learner in situations other than that of a tourist is also recognised. Finally, teachers are challenged to look for materials which locate cultural product and practices in a historical context and which encourage learners to understand behaviour in the context of the foreign culture's mentality and values. However, Sercu's guidelines do have their limitations. While the questions enable teachers to reflect on the type and quality of information about the target culture in a textbook, they fail to highlight the skills domain in ICC. A textbook aimed at developing ICC would have to include role-plays and project work which gave learners opportunities to learn how to carry out ethnographic interviewing or how to analyse a cultural document in order to identify the cultural values and perspectives which it contains.

Although intercultural learning has yet to make a great impact on the world of textbooks, two publications for German as a foreign language have received much praise in the literature for their focus on intercultural issues (Byram et. al., 1994; Dlaska, 2000; Roche, 2001). *Sprachbrücke* (Mebus et. al., 1987) put a particular emphasis on the role of register in communication and also deal with the importance of social context for appropriate language use. The authors of *Sprachbrücke* go to extreme lengths to avoid imposing German cultural norms as the model for learners to follow and the German perspective on appropriate behaviour is regularly portrayed as simply one among many others. Some educators have been critical of this 'extreme' intercultural approach because, even if it made learners aware of cultural difference per se, it was not particularly suited to helping learners to learn German rules of interaction.

Other, more recent textbooks which have focussed on aspects of culture learning and ICC include "What's it like?" (Collie and Martin, 2000), which is not a traditional language textbook as such, but rather a British Area Studies textbook for intermediate language learners which attempts to combine language with culture learning. The book focuses on a broad range of topics related to modern British society including cultural diversity, sport and education and offers a wide variety of text types as well as authentic interviews with young British people on the audio cassette. Here in Germany, the Gymnasium textbook for EFL *Across Cultures* (Porteous-Schwier, Reinders, Ross and Schüttauf, 2002) takes a more culture-general approach and deals with issues such as stereotypes, cultural differences in values and how to develop critical cultural awareness by presenting a range of authentic materials based on the themes of European-American relations, Multiculturalism in Britain and the effects of Globalisation on Africa. However, textbooks such as these would appear to be the exception rather than the rule.

If textbooks are generally inadequate in providing material for the development of ICC, what should, then, teachers use? Educators have proposed a varied range of resources and activities for both inside and outside the classroom which can support intercultural learning. The following sub-section offers an overview of these activities.

1.4.1.2 Classroom Activities for Developing ICC

In the search for innovative ways of developing learners' ICC, educators have turned to a wide variety of resources and activities. The areas of literature and drama

(which had of late not been very fashionable in ELT methodology) have been found to be very effective for making learners sensitive to alternative cultural perspectives, while opportunities for direct intercultural contact, such as study visits and tandem learning, have also been exploited to develop learners' intercultural communicative skills. Durant (1997) outlines what he considers to be the nine 'main conventional' sources of material for cultural studies and the list illustrates the great variety of sources available to teachers and learners of ICC. The sources include: interaction with members of the target culture, recorded testimony of members of the target culture, visits to the country, the country's media, data from ethnographic fieldwork, historical and political data, surveys and statistics, heuristic contrasts and oppositions and, finally, fashions and styles from the target culture. Although I would suggest that literature extracts are a curious absentee from this list, this is quite a comprehensive overview of resources for culture learning. Not only does the author deal with macro-level, top-down resources (i.e. resources that provide information about the culture on a national level, such as historical data, surveys and statistics etc.), but he also covers the micro-level approach by providing resources taken from ethnographic research and testimony of individual members of the target culture.

In their collection of reports on how to develop ICC, Byram et. al. (2001) found certain themes emerging repeatedly in current practice. Firstly, culture learning was seen as a comparative process which encouraged learners to become more aware of cultural phenomena in their own society as well as in the target culture. Secondly, considerable emphasis was being given to developing skills of analysis and interpretation of cultural data from the target culture. Thirdly, learners were being given many opportunities to collect authentic data for themselves, either by exploring the resources available to them in their own society or by using technology to come into contact with distant cultures. Finally, the authors found that literature was considered particularly useful in developing intercultural understanding.

The types of literature being used for intercultural learning has been quite varied. Educators have used children's literature (O'Sullivan and Rösler, 2000), fictional texts (Burwitz-Melzer, 2000, 2001), multicultural literature (Richter, 2000) as well as translated texts and their originals (Strümper-Krobb, 2000). Bredella explains that there are various reasons why literary texts can contribute to intercultural learning. Firstly,

literary texts are, of course, authentic documents from the target culture which can be easily used in the classroom. Secondly, they can also present issues and conflicts which are considered important by that culture. As literature often presents interpretations of events which are different to those of the learner, the activity offers an opportunity for learners to experience another perspective and to reflect on culturally specific beliefs which they may have taken for granted until now. Müller-Hartmann is also convinced of the value of using literary texts for intercultural learning and he explains his reasons in the following way:

> "Auf der einen Seite besteht ein enger Zusammenhang zwischen der Auseinandersetzung mit Literatur und interkulturellem Lernen. Literarische Texte stellen fremdkulturelle Realitäten dar, oft in kritischer Form. Im aktiven Leseprozeß schaffen Leser Bedeutungen und setzen sich so mit den durch den Text evozierten kulturellen Bedeutungen auseinander." (1999a: 169)

The process of reading literature is therefore quite similar to the process of intercultural understanding. Learners are confronted with alternative worldviews and are forced to reconcile these new perspectives with their own. The fact that the learners are experiencing the perspective of the target culture through a text and its characters and not in a situation of 'real' intercultural contact means that the experience is less threatening and they have the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the foreign perspective in the safety of their classroom.

Burwitz-Melzer (2000, 2001) has made an important contribution to the work on intercultural learning through literature by developing a list of intercultural objectives and corresponding observable behaviour based on work with fictional texts. This approach breaks down intercultural learning into a practical set of tasks and allows teachers to verify how successful their learners have been in the activity. For example, she suggests one of the objectives for intercultural learning in literature may be for learners to identify a conflict or misunderstanding between cultures and this can be verified by getting learners to actually name the conflict and to explain its culturally determined causes. Literature, therefore, obviously holds great potential for developing intercultural understanding and also for giving learners opportunities to practise their skill of interpreting authentic documents from the target culture and identifying the cultural values and beliefs which they contain.

Apart from literature, educators have also looked at the opportunities which direct contact with members of the target culture in real-time situations can offer for developing the skills and attitudes of ICC. However, in comparison to the literature on the use of literary texts, research in this area reveals a wariness about making any claims that intercultural contact, either through tandem or study visits, will easily lead to intercultural learning.

Tandem is defined by Brammerts (2001) as an activity in which two people with different mother tongues communicate together in order to learn from each other. Although tandem is, in principle, an intercultural activity, there has been surprisingly little emphasis placed on its role in developing ICC. While much research has looked at its value for developing autonomy and language awareness in learners (Brammerts, 2001; Wolff, 1999), the question of intercultural learning through tandem remains relatively unexplored. There are, of course, exceptions. Woodin (2001) looked at culture learning in face-to-face tandems and found certain evidence in learner diaries of learners developing the different attitudes, skills and knowledge of ICC. However, she also found that learners were often not clear as to what culture learning involved and tended to view the process merely as a question of collecting facts about the target culture as opposed to trying to analyse and draw conclusions from this information. She suggests that learners be made more aware of how to analyse and reflect on intercultural contact. She also recommends that cultural aspects need to be given more weighting in the assessment of tandem modules in order to encourage learners to attribute more importance to the area. In a review of the literature on tandem learning, Jürgen Wolff (1999) concludes that there is still a lack of evidence to support the claim that tandem learning is supportive of intercultural learning and he warns that the language learning process is likely to be much easier to support through tandem than its intercultural equivalent: "Es ist leichter, dass ein Paar seinen Sprachlernprozess steuert, als seinen interkulturellen Lernprozess, da es diesen wesentlich subjektiver und engagierter betrachtet." (1999: 146) Intercultural learning is likely to be more difficult than the language learning process as learners are also much less *aware* of how they are shaped and influenced by their own cultural principles and values and, as a result, find it difficult to be open to alternative cultural interpretations of cultural behaviour and points of view.

Like tandem learning, study visits and student exchanges are common techniques for developing ICC in second and third level foreign language learners. Of course, this form of intercultural 'fieldwork' is certainly not new to foreign language learning and here in Germany, *'erlebte Landeskunde'* has not only brought German students into contact with members of the target cultures (i.e. French or Britain), but also with members of many other cultures (see examples of contact between German students with partners from Poland and Sweden in Rinke (1998) and Denkler-Hemmert (1998)). However, the recent literature on how study visits and class exchanges can contribute to intercultural learning has produced rather sober findings and writers have stressed the need to move away from commonly held assumptions that intercultural contact will automatically lead to tolerance and acceptance of other cultures (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002; Grau, 2001). Instead, a greater awareness of the different contextual factors has been called for and the possible problems and difficulties which such fieldwork can involve have been examined.

Grau (2000) reports that the success of student exchanges depends on factors such as how well the exchange is arranged, the type of preparation activities, how the students are accompanied and guided by their teachers and how the 'debriefing' takes places after the contact. Her own research focuses on how the attitudes and perceptions of the teachers can influence the success of such projects. Delanoy (1999) examines the relative failure of a study visit of Czech university students to his class on English literature in Austria. The author suggests that prior-contact between the two groups of student beforehand and an increased student role in planning the organisation of the project would have led to more successful outcomes. Byram (1999) reports more positive results from an intercultural learning project which involved Czech university students spending time in an English secondary school in order to investigate different Czech and English attitudes to education. Students spent time engaging in ethnographic research at the school, observing classes and carrying out interviews with students and staff. Byram claims that such fieldwork is the ideal place for developing learners attitudes of curiosity and openness and their skills of discovery and interaction. However, he insists that fieldwork needs to be combined with class work so that the experiences and the materials gained in the target culture and be analysed and compared with perspectives from the home culture (1999: 377).

In a separate publication, Byram et. al. (2002) suggest that, in order to develop ICC successfully, teachers and organisers need to take into account the three separate phases of exchanges as well as the different activities which each part involves. These can be summed up as follows:

The preparatory phase: Before the contact between the two groups takes place, learners are given the opportunity to express and discuss their fears, anxieties and thoughts about the upcoming visit.

Fieldwork phase: When the learners are in contact with the other culture, they should have the opportunity to withdraw from the intercultural contact and be on their own to reflect on the on-going contact. Keeping a learner diary of the experience may be useful to encourage reflection. Having opportunities to discuss one's experiences with teachers and fellow students may also be useful.

Follow-up phase: When the visit or exchange is over, learners need further opportunities to share and compare their experiences. Preparing a presentation or report for others who were not involved in the project may encourage learners to decentre and see the exchange from another viewpoint (2002:19-20).

Of course, apart from 'specialised' techniques, such as the use of fieldwork and literature, an impressive body of literature is emerging with reports and suggestions as to how intercultural learning can be made the focus of 'traditional' communicative language teaching scenarios. The overall aims of these activities appears to be developing learners' skills of analysis and interpretation and also increasing their knowledge of the target culture. The comparison between the home and target cultures is also very common. To achieve these aims, educators have made great use of authentic materials from the target culture. Husemann (2000), for example, proposes the analysis of political cartoons from both the home and target cultures in order to explore the stereotypes which both cultures may hold of each other, while Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) suggest getting learners to work on 'Agony Aunt' letters from the newspapers in the target culture. Duffy and Mayes (2001) report on a French course for secondary school students which made extensive use of video recordings, interviews with native speakers, press articles, statistical information and short story extracts to illustrate to their students how family life was experienced from a French point of view. Having worked on the material, role-play and imaginative writing activities encouraged learners to put themselves in the role of a French person or to mediate between French and British perspectives in situations of cultural misunderstanding.

1.4.2 Specialised Approaches to Developing ICC

Apart from the application of different techniques and activities within the foreign language classroom (see the previous section), educators have also used two approaches in order to develop learners' ICC. These are Cultural Studies and Ethnography. Both of these have their origins in disciplines which were originally aimed at the study of culture, but not for the purposes of foreign language education. I will now explore each of these approaches in some detail as they both will be employed in technology-enhanced environments in this thesis' empirical research.

1.4.2.1 Cultural Studies

While much of culture learning often takes place within the framework of traditional language classes, the tradition of offering specific classes or courses to Area studies, Cultural Studies or *Landeskunde* has existed internationally at university level for many years (Mountford and Wadham-Smith, 2000; Zeuner, 1999) and this trend has developed to such an extent over the past decade that Kramer suggests "the cultural dimension of the modern national philologies is in the process of being given the same status as the linguistic and literary ones" (2000c: 42). The modern incarnations of Cultural Studies which can be found in foreign language departments today usually reflect one of two quite different approaches or are a hybrid combination of them both. The first of these approaches is the traditional *Landeskunde* or Area Studies approach which has focussed on presenting and analysing the history, politics and sociological aspects of the target culture. Modern approaches to this approach have also included a reflective element which has encouraged learners to compare the target culture with their own. While this approach is quite well known and has already been referred to regularly in this chapter, the second approach, often referred to as 'British Cultural Studies', needs to be described in more detail.

British Cultural Studies has its origins in the publications of British writers such as Raymond Williams (1958), E.P. Thomson (1963) and Richard Hoggart (1957). Although these authors looked at British culture from a native speaker perspective and not from the perspective of foreign language education, their approach has significantly influenced how foreign language departments have approached the study of foreign

cultures. The Cultural Studies movement attempted to move away from the common perception of the time that culture was exclusively the products and practices of the upper classes, and instead defined the term as a process which was continuously being constructed and practised by all echelons of society. In their research, the writers looked at the products of the working class and different ethnic communities, aspects which had, up until then, been excluded from the accepted canon of cultural knowledge. Although this interpretation of culture may not seem surprising today, Bassnett explains that at the time this concept was far from being taken for granted:

> "Today, such pluralism hardly seems radical. We have come to accept this notion unhesitantly, because it seems so obvious. But in the 1950's, it challenged a fundamental premise of homogeneity, the existence of a single entity that could be controlled by those who decreed what culture was and what it was not… 'Culture' was still thought of as the property of a group who determined what should and should not be admitted to its realm." (1997: xiv-xv)

The discipline was further developed in 1964 when Hoggart and Stuart Hall established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. Influenced by various theoretical approaches including Marxism and Structuralism, the Centre looked at issues such as feminism, media and popular culture (see Easthope, 1997 for a detailed description of the trends within the discipline). Today, Cultural Studies is essentially multi-disciplinary in nature (what Kramer describes as "a productive kind of eclecticism" (2000b: 162) and borrows from Sociology, Semiotics and Literary Criticism to investigate changes in British society. In recent years it has expanded to cover issues of race and gender as well as class and ethnicity. It has also been taken up by practitioners in other countries. The *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* provides a forum for the presentation and discussion of the discipline in German-speaking countries, while the *Latin American British Studies Association* has focussed on Spanish and Portuguese speaking communities. The British Council has contributed to its development with its publication for teachers and students *British Studies Now* and with its website for British Studies. The techniques of Cultural Studies can perhaps best be seen in foreign language education today in the application of discourse and textual analysis to different types of texts and media, including films, speeches, newspaper articles and visual images (Teske, 2002).

If Area Studies and British Cultural Studies were originally two quite distinct disciplines, the modern reality is that many culture courses in foreign language departments borrow from both, combining semiotic with historical and sociological analyses in order to engage learners in the study of the foreign culture. Kramer sees the central aims of the modern version of this area of study to be the following:

> "to understand (to study, learn about, do research into) a particular culture and society and, by doing so, to learn to understand cultures in general. At the same time, it is intended that the process of understanding a culture which differs from one's own should also lead to a better understanding of one's own culture." (2000c: 42)

It is clear from this definition that in order to understand a foreign culture it is necessary to reconstruct it and deal with its social reality and its symbolical representation through the perspective of the learners' own language and their cultural background. A logical consequence of this process is therefore learners compare the home and target cultures and reflect on their own, achieving one of the principal aims of intercultural learning. Kramer points out that Cultural Studies "forms but a part, though an indispensable part, of IC [intercultural competence]" (2000c: 46). It is therefore, in contrast to previous versions of Cultural Studies, much more than simply providing facts or information about the target culture, instead it is a "complex but flexible structure (or network) of culturally specific knowledge, skills and attitudes" (2000:46) which enable learners to communicate with speakers of the target language, negotiate between the home and target cultures and reflect on their own culture. Cultural Studies therefore covers the culture *specific* aspects of ICC. As was discussed earlier, I would suggest that the skills, attitudes and cultural awareness which learners gain from dealing with one particular culture, will support them when they come into contact with other cultures.

Starting from the above definition of Cultural Studies, Nünning and Nünning (2000) outline how the approach can be put into practice. In contrast to ethnography for language learners which will be looked at in the following sub-section, learners do not encounter the foreign culture through direct contact, but through texts and other cultural products. Through investigating these texts, learners develop their ability to become aware of the foreign perspective. However, the authors point out that only when learners demonstrate that they can adopt the skills which they have learned in the classroom to

situations of real intercultural contact can it be said that the learning process has been successful.

Here lies an important limitation of Cultural Studies when seen from the perspective of foreign language education. The discipline is principally concerned with the analysis of texts within a classroom context. Learners, therefore, may have adequate opportunities to develop their skills of interpretation and analysis and their attitudes of curiosity and their knowledge of social practices. However, they will not be able to engage in fieldwork and will not develop their skills of discovery and interaction "under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram, 1997a: 52). For this reason, I would argue that Cultural Studies should be seen as one of a number of tools for developing ICC in foreign language learners.

The authors, in their paper 'British Cultural Studies Konkret' (2000: 6-9) outline ten key principles which reflect the way in which modern Cultural Studies tends to differentiate itself from the more traditional approaches to *Landeskunde*. It will become clear that many of the elements of ICC and intercultural learning are also present in Cultural Studies. However, the authors hasten to add that this should not be seen as a polarised, black and white depiction of old and new approaches, but rather as an overview of developments or trends which have been gradually taking place in the area. It is useful now to look at this principles in order to facilitate, at a later stage of this study, the application of Cultural Studies to on-line learning environments.

1. From teaching facts to developing intercultural competence
Previously, the purpose of *Landeskunde* had been seen as presenting positive background information about the history and the present of the English speaking countries. In contrast to this, modern approaches to Cultural Studies aim to help learners develop transferable skills for intercultural negotiation and communication. As was seen above, Kramer argues that Cultural Studies will help develop culture-*specific* knowledge and skills, and these can later be transferred to other scenarios of intercultural contact.

2. From a teacher to a learner centred learning process

As the learning process is no longer about presenting facts and information, but rather about achieving both affective and cognitive change within the learners, it is necessary to begin by focussing on the learners' own culture, their interests, motivation, schemata and the perspectives which they bring to the learning process. This is particularly relevant when the choice of themes for a course is being made. If educators are capable of choosing themes which are of interest or of relevance to learners in their own culture, then they are likely to be able to raise learners' interest in how these themes are represented in the target culture as well.

3. From product to process orientation

Developing empathy and skills of intercultural competence is an on-going, perhaps never-ending, process which cannot be simply presented and taught by teachers. Instead, it is a process which requires intensive dialogue and interaction with learners and depends to a great extent on the development of attitudes and learning strategies which the learners will be able to use themselves in an autonomous fashion. Brumfit (1997) is critical of how little research and discussion has appeared in the literature on the question of how learners actually acquire new cultural knowledge. He suggests, like Nünning and Nünning, a constructivist, process-based approach for culture learning:

> "First, learners construct their own meanings by a process of engagement with appropriate data. They must, therefore, be offered opportunities to interact with data. Second, their construction of effective meaning depends on being able to integrate their new understanding with the sets of categories they are already using to deal with previous experience. Thus learning depends on the new and the old." (1997: 49)

4. From teacher orientation to negotiation and project orientation

Understanding the foreign culture involves a mixture of cognitive and affective factors, as opposed to being merely a cognitive activity. It is therefore necessary to develop innovative forms of project-based learning in order to give learners the opportunity to practise and develop the different aspects of intercultural communicative competence in motivating and realistic settings. Many examples of good project work abound in the Cultural Studies literature. As will be seen later in this section, Kramer (1997, 2000d) proposes various text-based projects, while

Edginton (1999) provides a useful collection of audio-, video- and text-based materials aimed at helping learners to understand the British media.

5. *Examplary learning and teaching*

It is impossible to draw up a definitive list of topics for cultural learning, therefore it is necessary for the teacher to choose texts and topics which are representative of and of central importance to the target culture. Based on their work on these areas, the learners are expected to develop the relevant skills and attitudes which can later be applied to other topics. However, it is important to be aware that the choice of topics in a Cultural Studies course will inevitably reflect a certain set of values and a certain interpretation of the target culture. Brumfit warns that while a 'canon' may exist of a culture's important events, figures and movements in the past, course designers and teachers will have to make their own principled decisions about what aspects of modern society will be studied in the course. By choosing certain subjects and ignoring others, a course automatically presents to learners one possible picture of a culture. A teacher designing a course, for example, on modern day Ireland will inevitably have to decide on how much time should be dedicated to the question of the troubles in Northern Ireland. Since the success of the peace process, the question of the North is attributed considerably less importance in the Republic than before. Issues such as immigration, the Celtic Tiger and the decline of church influence are generally seen as having more immediate relevance. However, to a foreign student, the issue of Northern Ireland is likely to form a major part of their prior knowledge and of their interest in studying Irish Cultural Studies. The teacher is therefore faced with a decision: Should the course be representative of an insider's or an outsider's view of the culture? The question can have no immediate answer but a balanced mix of both perspectives will probably be most beneficial.

6. *From 'the' culture to various cultures*

One of the most important aspects of the modern version of Cultural Studies is that it is no longer considered appropriate to talk about 'British culture' or 'American culture' per se. Students need to be made aware of the different sub-cultures and regional cultures which may exist within one political nation. One of the best-known definitions of British Studies (i.e. Cultural Studies applied to Britain)

suggests that the subject should highlight "the pluralism that results from differences of nationality, class, race, gender, language, place and generation" (British Council, 1992 cited in Mountford and Wadham, 2000: 1).

7. From knowledge about the target culture to culture comparison

Modern approaches to the area no longer focus solely on gaining information about the target culture (i.e. a monocultural approach), but rather emphasise how learning about the target culture brings learners to critically reflect on and become aware of their own cultural background and how this influences how they see the world.

8. Variety of perspectives and change of perspective

By being made aware of the different cultural perspectives between their own and the target culture, as well as the different sub-cultures within the target culture itself, it is hoped that learners' ability to appreciate and empathise with alternative perspectives will be improved. This is the intercultural understanding which has been seen as a vital aspect of intercultural communicative competence.

9. From learning facts to intercultural communicative competence

As Cultural Studies now involves a complex combination of cognitive, affective and skill-based learning aims, a more holistic didactic approach is necessary which would combine methods and approaches from the disciplines of linguistics, literature and British Cultural Studies.

10. From language learning to language and culture learning

Finally, due to the interconnected relationship between language and culture, an integrated approach is necessary where both can be taught as one. This is particularly important as modern approaches require teachers to examine "analytically at how discourse in the English language conveys specific cultural meanings and values in and across all those cultures where the language is regularly used" (Durant, 1997: 35).

 Kramer's comprehensive work 'British Cultural Studies' (1997) reflects these principles, and also goes on to propose a concrete methodological approach for dealing with this interpretation of Cultural Studies. Of particular interest are the four key

'considerations' which the author sees as vital for the development of a course in Cultural Studies (1997: 73-77). First of all, it is necessary for learners to receive a detailed and interconnected picture of the foreign culture so that they are able to achieve a comprehensive understanding of it. This overview is referred to by Kramer as *reconstruction*. Secondly, students should be engaged in a process of *translation*, in which the home and target cultures are compared and contrasted. Kramer explains that it is through this process of translation that learners are brought to develop their own cultural identities and become more aware of which aspects of their own culture are specific to them and which are universal.

Thirdly, as a culture cannot be completely summarised or described, great care should be taken in the selection of the aspects of the culture which are going to be presented in the course. These elements should be representative and of importance for the target culture. The author calls for the selection of topics to take into account current developments in that culture as well as the historical dimension which provides the context for the current situation and thereby facilitates understanding. He also calls for the materials and topics to be approached from various perspectives and for the use of various methodologies of analysis in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the culture.

Finally, through dealing with the chosen topics, students need to be trained in methodological skills which they can later transfer and apply to the study to other aspects of that culture. An important part of this training in the methodology of cultural investigation is becoming aware of the different levels of abstraction which are involved in Cultural Studies (1997: 77). These levels are the micro-level (the particular example or situation which is being studied), the mezo-level (where the function and meaning of this cultural product or practice becomes clear) and, finally, the macro-level (where the product or practice and its immediate context are located with in a greater scheme of analysis). According to Kramer, it is only when learners become aware of how individual cultural products and practices form part of broader social configurations, structures and systems that they will be able to apply this knowledge to other situations and topics. He illustrates this point with the following example: Using a song in class, such as "Redemption Song" by Bob Marley, may lead to the study of materials about the African origins of the slaves, the slave trade itself and the slave's living conditions

in America. These topics are seen to belong to the mezo-level. From there, the study may move from the slave trade to the greater economical and political contexts in which it was located, i.e. imperialism, capitalism etc. (the macro-level). The author represents the relationship between the three levels in the following way:

MACRO-LEVEL *(systematic)*	THE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF CAPITALISM			
	IMPERIALISM ... PRIMARY ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL : *Industrial capital* *Merchant capital* - ... - Mercantilism - The Triangular Trade - ...			
MEZO-LEVEL *(configurative)*		(Parent cultures) Youth cultures in late capitalist societies	A history of Afro-American relations	
MICRO-LEVEL *(exemplary)*	...	Bob Marley Redemption Song		...
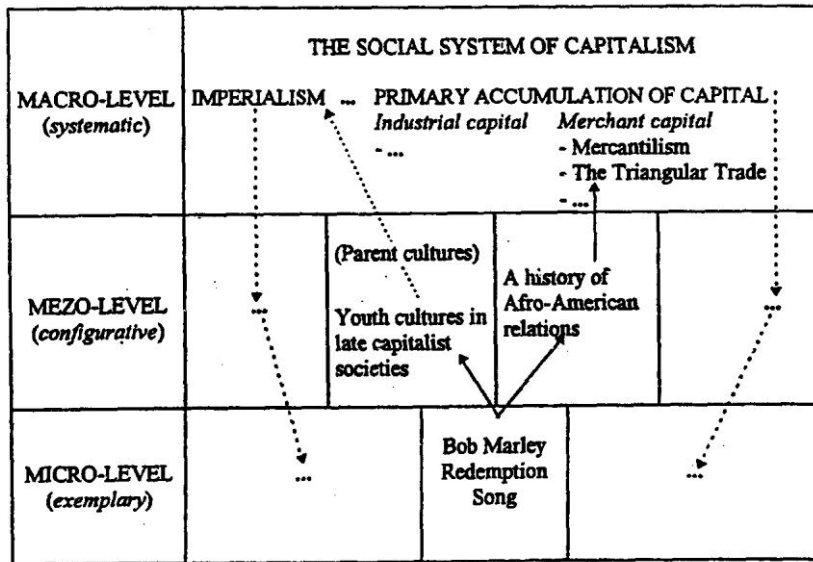
Fig. 1.3 Illustration of link between different levels of context: Kramer (1997: 77)

The identification of different levels of abstraction is useful to foreign language education as it helps to put cultural products and practices into a historical and theoretical context. Learners are encouraged to become aware that people's behaviour does not simply exist 'for its own sake', but is a consequence of historical, political and social developments. An awareness of this process may discourage learners from dismissing foreign behaviour as 'strange' or 'barbaric'.

Based on his four 'considerations', Kramer puts forward a practical approach for dealing with materials in the British Cultural Studies classroom which is based on group and project work (1997: 130-132). Students choose a topic based on their course book or the list of topic areas with which they are provided (e.g. the topic may be 'the family', 'social class' or 'Britain in Europe') and are then asked to find information on either the historical context or the current situation of that theme. Through this project-based approach, students learn how to find resources (in libraries, or through the British Council), to use these resources to answer specific questions and finally, to work together in groups in order to create and present a finished product in class based on

their research. During all stages in this process, Kramer insists on the importance of comparing with and reflecting on the home culture.

The author offers the example of the topic 'Monarchy in Britain'. He suggests various newspaper articles on the topic of building a new yacht for the royal family in Britain with the help of taxpayers' money. The articles provide a broad overview of the different points of view in England in respect to the monarchy, while other German articles on the topic encourage learners to compare the British and German attitudes to the role of monarchy in society. Kramer (1997: 147) sees the advantages of such project-based research work as threefold. Firstly, students are learning about British culture and society in small manageable 'extracts' and are also comparing British cultural perspectives to their own as opposed to simply learning 'facts and figures' about the target culture in general. Secondly, as students are allowed to choose the topic which they wish to research, they are also finding out about an area which is of interest to them. Finally, through their research the students are also learning to apply various critical perspectives to the topics which they are dealing with.

In conclusion, while Cultural Studies is without doubt a valid and effective approach to engage learners with the target culture in the classroom, its current incarnations are heavily concentrated on the analysis of different types of texts. This can be particularly useful when teachers want their learners to explore the target culture from a 'top-down' approach and study developments within British or Irish or German society in general. However, the development of ICC also requires, by definition, a strong focus on interaction and the negotiation of meaning between cultures in situations of intercultural contact. This aspect of ICC can best acquired by engaging learners in contact with members of the target culture. In the words of Roberts et. al. (2001), culture learning needs to involve '*learning in*' and '*learning through*' as well as '*learning about*'. The following section will therefore look at how ethnographic approaches have been employed to develop language learners' ICC . It will be argued that aspects of this approach can be used in combination with Cultural Studies to develop a comprehensive methodology for developing ICC in foreign language education.

1.4.2.2 Ethnography for Language Learners

Ethnography is a research method, originally developed in the field of anthropology, which aims to describe a culture from the point of view of members of that culture. An anthropological definition of culture and the use of techniques such as ethnography are becoming more prominent in language and culture learning today. A quick review of the history of the discipline show that the discipline of anthropology has always taken into account the important role which language plays in social life. Early writers in the area, such as Boas, Sapir and Whorf, all focussed a great deal of their work on the significance of language in Native American societies, and one of the fathers of anthropology, Malinowski, was one of the first to identify the importance of placing language in its appropriate cultural context in order to appreciate its true meaning. Such an understanding can be seen in the following insights which he made in relation to his study of the Trobriand Islanders: "Language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture..."(1923: 305) and "An utterance becomes only intelligible when it is placed within its context of situation..."(1923: 306). It was seen in section 1.1 that more recently, Nostrand (1974) based his 'emergent model' on sociological and anthropological concepts. Also, the value of ethnography for language and culture learning was also recognised by Stern (1983), who, in his extensive review of the teaching of culture in foreign language education, suggested that teachers use ethnographies of the target cultures in order to create materials for their language/culture classes. However Stern also recognised that, at the time, there was a lack of such studies on advanced industrialised societies, thereby rendering this approach problematic and impractical.

In contrast to Stern's approach, ethnography has recently become popular in foreign language teaching scenarios, not as a source of material for teachers, but rather as a methodology which language learners themselves can employ in order to learn about language and culture. Ethnographic techniques, particularly participant observation and ethnographic interviewing, are being increasingly recognised as valuable tools for helping language learners to develop as intercultural speakers. Although ethnography is being employed most regularly in scenarios where language students are spending time abroad (with the university Erasmus program, for example), in today's multicultural societies there are also adequate opportunities for learners to engage in ethnographic studies in their home cultures. Reports in the literature suggest that ethnography has

been used to engage members of the target culture who live in the home culture (Batemann, 2002, Robinson and Nocon, 1996), in on-line language learning environments (Belz, 2001; Fischer, 1997; Fischhaber, 2002) and in the target culture during periods of study abroad (Barro *et. al.*, 1998; Byram, 1999; Roberts *et. al.*, 2001).

But in what ways does ethnography contribute to developing intercultural communicative competence? To answer this question it is necessary to look at what ethnography actually is and what interpretation of culture it involves. Barro *et. al.* define ethnography as the study of other people and the social and cultural patterns that give meaning to their lives (1998: 78). Ethnography, therefore, involves learning to understand how culture organises and permeates the everyday life of the individual. It is, in the words of Hymes, about learning "the meanings, norms and patterns of a way of life" (1980: 98). Roberts describes it as a process of understanding "how things get done, what meanings they have and how there is coherence and indeed patterns of flux... in everyday life" (2002: 35). Ethnography does not consider culture to be a finite set of facts or behaviour but something which is being continuously constructed and altered through interaction and through language. In contrast to a Cultural Studies approach, which has focussed mainly on the analysis of texts from the target culture, ethnographic provides students with a much more 'hands-on' approach which engages them with the foreign culture on the micro level of individuals' behaviour before linking this with the 'macro-level' of the socio-cultural environment. One of the expected outcomes of engaging in ethnographic research is that learners will be brought to reflect on their own identity and themselves as cultural beings.

Ethnographic methodology usually involves living and participating in the everyday lives of the target group (the technique known as 'participant observation'), collecting data during this period and then analysing the data in order to identify the cultural patterns which emerge from it. Therefore, this type of research methodology, when applied to the context of language learning, moves culture learning from being a superficial description of facts and behaviour of the foreign culture to what Geertz (1975) describes as 'thick description', which involves detailed observation and interpretation of behaviour and what it means through the eyes of member of the target group.

This approach to studying culture and language is seen by many to be particularly suited to the development of cultural awareness and ICC for various reasons. Firstly, Fischer points out that an ethnographic approach moves away from a more traditional definition of culture and makes learners aware that culture is not simply a set of facts to be learned, but is rather about understanding how "..meanings reside in discourse" (Fischer, 1997: 108) and that therefore words and utterances cannot be seen to have absolute meanings. The author offers the example of the term 'patriotism' and suggests that it has two completely different meanings or interpretations, depending on whether it is used in the German or North American cultural contexts. Secondly, as the ethnographer is required to try and describe the meanings of behaviour from another perspective, Jurasek maintains that an outcome of learners using the approach will be "an ever-increasing ability to recognise at least in a limited way what things might look like from the viewpoint of members of another culture" (1995: 228). In other words, ethnography should lend itself to the development of intercultural understanding which was seen it section 1.2.1.3 to be at the centre of intercultural communicative competence. Finally, Roberts *et. al.* see the value of ethnography for intercultural learning in the fact that it is an interactive activity which engages learners with the foreign culture on a local, face-to-face level through the process of participant observation. Therefore, instead of simply learning about the foreign culture on a detached level through texts and other media, learners come to understand that culture by taking an active part in it: "They develop both linguistic and intercultural competences in the experience of fieldwork interaction as both verbal and non-verbal, as embedded in a 'context of situation'" (Roberts *et. al.*, 2001: 242). This is in contrast to the Culture Studies approach seen in the previous section.

Beers (2001) identifies four skills which learners develop in the process of carrying out critical ethnographic research and it is interesting to note how these skills reflect the awareness, skills and attitudes which form part of learners' intercultural competence. The first of these skills, 'thick observation' refers to the ability to move from a static, product-based understanding of culture (i.e. culture as a collection of facts) to a process-based understanding that recognises "the fluidity of one's identity in relation to the social context in which he or she interacts" (2001: 20). It also involves being aware of the "various cultural discourses" (2001: 11) which are contained in cultural products and practices. This skill is reminiscent of Byram's critical cultural awareness, one of the

objectives of which is the ability to "identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one's own and other cultures" (1997a: 54). Such an awareness is vital if learners are to engage successfully in intercultural communication and to understand that behaviour will hold different meanings in different cultural contexts.

The second skill, 'thick interpretation', is the ability to identify the significance of the various elements which the ethnographer has observed in the greater cultural context. The ethnographer, like the intercultural speaker, needs to understand in what ways local, day-to-day behaviour and practices in the target culture are connected to and reflect other, more wider social, political and economic aspects of the culture in question. For example, how high emigration on a national level may affect a local football club. Similarly, Byram describes one of the aspects of his skills of analysis and interpretation as the ability to "identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document of event and explain their origins" (1997a: 53).

The third skill, thick comparison, refers to the ability to use the information one has gained from ethnographic study in order to reflect on and become aware of one's own identity and the cultural norms and patterns which underlie one's own culture. Of course, in order to be able to look at one's own culture from such a detached perspective, it is first of all necessary to have an attitude of openness and to be willing to see alternative interpretations of one's own culture. In the words of Byram, the learner / ethnographer has to be willing "to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment" (1997a: 52).

Finally, Beers calls the fourth and final skill of ethnography 'thick description', which is the ability to create a written account of the ethnographic study which collects the different observations and converts them into a representative and partial account of the cultural event which is being studied (2001: 11). Although the intercultural speaker, unlike the ethnographer, will not necessarily be called on to write ethnographic accounts of the foreign culture, the ability to make *tentative* generalisations and to identify patterns in cultural behaviour is no doubt necessary in order to anticipate problems of miscommunication between cultures and to avoid stereotyping. In other words, the skill of thick description forms part of the skills of discovery and interaction, and in particular, the ability to mediate between different cultural interpretations of events.

Based on this short overview, ethnography can be seen as a practical tool or method which is particularly suited for developing the skills, attitudes and awareness which form part of intercultural competence. Aspects such as the sociological definition of culture which ethnography entails, the need to reflect on one's own cultural identity, the aim of connecting everyday cultural behaviour to wider social, political or economic contexts and the principle of learning through interaction all correspond with the description of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural learning which has been presented in this chapter.

Having seen what ethnography entails and how training learners in this approach may contribute to their intercultural competence, it is perhaps useful to look at how a ethnography has been employed in different language learning scenarios. Publications by both Bateman (2002) and Robinson and Nocon (1996) describes how ethnographic interviewing techniques can be successfully exploited in the home culture. Both pieces of research report on university-level learners of Spanish in the United States carrying out ethnographic interviews with Spanish speakers who were living in the students' home towns. Using ethnographic interviewing techniques such as listening actively and asking questions based on the interviewees' responses, it was hoped that students would become more aware of the *emic* or insider point of view and discover "natural categories of meaning in the interviewee's mind" (Bateman, 2002: 320). In both studies, students were asked to write a term project which dealt with what they had learned about the people they had interviewed and their culture, as well as discussing what they had learned about their own culture and their own interaction style (Bateman, 2002: 323 and Robinson and Nocon, 1996: 438). Both publications revealed that the ethnographic projects had improved students' attitudes towards Spanish speakers as well as increasing their desire to continue learning Spanish. Bateman also reports that her students became more aware of their own culture and had opportunities to see it from an outside perspective. However, the author also notes that the project had led students to generalise a great deal about members of the target culture (i.e. "Hispanic people tend to be more family oriented that Americans") even though they had only interviewed a few subjects.

Reports of students using ethnography during periods of residence abroad appears to be more common in the literature. The work of Roberts *et. al.* (2001) is based on the 'Ealing Ethnography Programme' at Thames Valley University which involves a two-stage learning process for students of foreign languages. In the second year of study, students take part in a 45 hour course, during which they are introduced to the anthropological and sociological concepts behind ethnography and carry out a short 'home ethnography' project. In the second stage of the project, students engage in ethnographic fieldwork in the country where they spend their time abroad and finally, during their final year of study, they write up a report based on this data.

The authors report that the initial course in ethnography is based around getting students to ask three questions about everyday cultural behaviour:

> "What is going on?
> What meaning does it have?
> How does it come to have these meanings?" (Roberts *et. al.*, 2001: 118)

The first question, 'what is going on?' refers to the ability to understand that culture is being 'carried out' in everyday practices. It is necessary to encourage students to avoid identifying cultural behaviour as either 'ordinary' (because it is similar to behaviour they see in their own culture) or 'exotic' (because it is different to that of the home culture). Instead, students need to look at cultural behaviour from a sociological perspective. The second question 'what meanings does it have?' challenges students to find out the cultural assumptions which members of a group have for doing what they do. Accumulated responses as to reasons behind behaviour allows patterns to emerge and the ethnographer can move from "individual responses to interpretation" (ibid: 19). Finally, 'how does it come to have meaning' brings learners to apply a historical and critical perspective to the cultural behaviour. What myths, constructs or facts lie behind people's interpretation of behaviour in a particular way. While, in the words of Geertz "cultural analysis is guessing at meaning" (1973: 20), Roberts *et. al.* insist that these guesses should be informed by evidence.

In order to help students understand the significance of this third question and to appreciate the link between behaviour on the everyday, local level and wider historical and critical perspectives, the course includes a section on 'groups and identities' in which students are asked to think about identity and the groups which they are members

of. Through the analysis of a video and their own data, students are made aware of the distinctions between national and ethnic identity and the argument that nations such as Britain are merely 'imagined communities'. Following this, the analysis of the ethnographic data which the students themselves have collected in their own communities, they come to understand sociological and anthropological concepts such as 'exchange' and 'socialisation'.

To give students practical experience in the skills of observation and elicitation, the unit of study on 'Gender Relations' sets the students with a task which encourages them to collect and analyse data on how gender affects interaction, power relations and language use. They are asked to observe interaction between men and women in the university common room for a ten minute period and, based on this observation, to answer questions as regards which gender initiates conversation, who talks and interrupts more and how the genders may differ according to pitch and loudness. Their data is then discussed together in class and triangulated with the relevant research on the subject.

Later stages in the course deal with aspects of ethnographic methodology including participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, the recording and analysis of data and the challenges which each of these may entail. Some of the difficulties which the students encounter involve distinguishing ethnographic interviews from the more traditional kind, and also moving from their own data and observation to more conceptual cultural categories. Among the topics which students in this project have chosen for their ethnographic research include the Italian concept of queuing, the significance of gift giving in Spain and politeness in public transport. Interestingly, the authors have found that although students are usually able to 'make strange' and to identify the patterns and symbolic systems which lie within the behaviour of the target group, "there is little evidence ...of a reflexive reassessment of their own pre-suppositions about the environment they found themselves in and also their own environment in England" (2001: 219). In other words, the belief that intercultural language learning, in the form of ethnographic research, will bring students to reflect critically on their own culture and understand how their own culture is socially constructed was not seen to be the case in this project. The authors suggest that "what was perhaps lacking in our work with students was an explicit incentive to see reflection

on self and the relationship of their own cultural values to those of the people they were studying as a legitimate aspect of foreign language work" (2001: 219). It has been shown that Bateman (2002) and Robinson and Nocon (1996) avoided this mistake by explicitly asking their students in their final essay to reflect on what they had learned about their own culture.

This brief description was intended to give an example how ethnography can be introduced to university language learners and how developing the techniques of ethnographic investigation can serve to develop their ICC. Of course, the practicality and viability of being able to adapt such ethnography courses for a large number of language learners is quite problematic. Third level language students in Britain are practically guaranteed a year in the target culture and therefore they will definitely have an opportunity to engage in an extended period of participant observation 'in the field'. However, what about learners in other countries who do not have such opportunities? Carrying out home ethnographies such as those reported above by Bateman (2002) and Robinson and Nocon (1996) are one possibility, particularly in areas which have a large expatriate population from the target culture. Furthermore, the introduction of information and communication technologies such as digital video and e-mail also mean that learners can use the skills of ethnography to study and interact with native speakers from the target group without having to leave their classrooms. Roberts *et. al.* identify the value of videoconferencing technology for such work and conclude that: "The affective engagement with others in such intercultural experience will doubtless be different from that in the field but may also be valuable and valid" (2002: 242).

In the case studies presented later in this study, it will be seen how ethnographic techniques of investigation and analysis were used by learners when engaging in intercultural exchanges via e-mail, message boards and videoconferencing.

1.5 Conclusion

In 1990, Valdes wrote: "There is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language; they go together like Sears & Roebuck – or Marks & Spencer, as the case may be" (1990: 20). Since then it has become almost a truism in the literature on FLT that language teaching *is* culture teaching. Few if any educators will claim that culture should not play a role in the foreign language classroom, however there are many differing interpretations as to how this should happen and as to what exactly culture learning actually means. For this reason, I set out in this opening chapter of this thesis to identify the main issues involved in teaching culture in FLT and I have also tried to present an overview of the methodologies and resources available to achieve this.

The chapter essentially attempted to answer three key questions related to the role of culture in foreign language education. Firstly, I aimed to account for the rise of intercultural approaches to foreign language learning in recent years. Secondly, I wished to establish what intercultural learning is generally considered to involve and to explore the more controversial aspects of this approach. Finally, I investigated how the principles of intercultural language learning could be effectively put into practice in the classroom.

It was established that intercultural approaches to foreign language education have emerged, to a great extent, in reaction to the failure of communicative approaches to deal adequately with the role of culture in language learning. Furthermore, many writers have questioned whether second language learners should be expected to follow the native speaker model which is at the heart of traditional approaches to communicative competence. It is unlikely that language learners can expect to become native speakers of the foreign language. It is also questionable whether language teachers have the right to expect their learners to abandon their own language and culture in order to take on those of the foreign country. Instead, learners should be trained to become informed bilinguals who have a good understanding and knowledge of both languages and cultures and who can therefore choose to what extent they wish to use the pragmatic rules of the foreign culture. However, I argued that taking away the native speaker model does not necessarily imply that learners should no longer be exposed to material from the target culture. Learners have a right to learn about the culture and pragmatic rules of the target culture, even if they decide later on not to put these into practice.

Furthermore, the skills and attitudes which learners develop by working on one foreign culture can later be transferred to other situations of cultural contact.

In relation to what intercultural learning involves, I suggested that modern approaches focus on the development of attitudes, skills and cultural awareness as well as mere cultural knowledge. Intercultural understanding, the ability to appreciate how cultural products and practices are perceived from an alternative cultural perspective, was seen to be at the heart of intercultural learning and ICC. Greater distancing from one's own cultural background, the important link between language and culture and an awareness of the heterogeneity within modern nations were also seen as important aspects of intercultural approaches. Finally, it was also noted that a careful balance must be struck between learning objectives in order to avoid an over-exaggerated influence of affective aims and neglecting the development of cultural knowledge.

As regards the final question, a review of the literature revealed a wide variety of methods and materials for developing intercultural competence in the foreign language classroom. However, the literature suggests intercultural learning will not occur from mere engagement in activities and teachers should be aware of their role in encouraging curiosity and openness, developing learners' intercultural skills and sensitising them to the concept of intercultural awareness. I also looked in detail at Cultural Studies and Ethnography, two particular approaches to intercultural learning which have become increasingly popular in third level language education. I suggested that learners should be exposed to both approaches in order to have the opportunity to engage in culture learning through the exploration of cultural 'texts' and also through first-hand engagement with members of the foreign culture. Versions of these approaches will be put into practice in the chapters which will follow later in this thesis.

Finally, one further important point should be underlined. While it is clear that the role of culture has increased its status in foreign language education, I would suggest that it has yet to achieve the attention it deserves in third-level foreign language education, here in Germany at least. Kramer expresses the wish "daß die Kulturwissenschaftliche Dimension des Faches – British Cultural Studies – als gleichrangig und gleichberechtigt neben den sprach- und literaturwissenschaftlichen anerkannt und entsprechend in allen Studiengängen und Prüfungsordnungen verankert

wird" (1997: 226). Unfortunately, that appears to be far from the case in the University where my own research was carried out. Therefore, I would argue that if Cultural Studies can not be attributed the necessary time and resources to develop learners' ICC then it is the responsibility of language teachers to deal more explicitly and more comprehensively with the cultural component in their classes.

The following chapter looks at the application of CALL, and in particular network-based language teaching, in the language classroom and analyses the contribution which this had made to the cultural component of language learning and to the aspects of ICC which have been outlined here.

2. Network-Based Language and Culture Learning

"For communication to be meaningful, we need to do more than link computers: We need to construct an approach to how others, in other cultures, experience their world." (*Furstenberg et. al., 2001:* 2)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter takes up the second major element of this study – information and communication technologies – and investigates two interrelated issues. Firstly, it looks at how the cultural dimension of foreign language learning has been represented in CALL materials and activities until now. Secondly, it aims to identify how the ever-growing area of on-line language learning can contribute to achieving the goals of the intercultural learner.

There is little doubt that these are relevant questions at this stage in the development of CALL. Even though computer-based technologies have become an integral part of foreign language-culture learning, and despite the fact that so much of intercultural communication takes place in on-line environments, observers have pointed out that the role of culture in computer assisted language learning has, to a great extent, been neglected or taken for granted (Moore, 1998; Lee, 1997). Instead of a close investigation of how the sociocultural element of language learning should best be dealt with by CALL and on-line learning, there has been what Hart (1999) describes as the virtual equivalent of the 'contact hypothesis' which assumes that exposure to foreign cultures and their representations on-line or through multimedia is somehow sufficient for the development of tolerance and intercultural understanding. The dearth of reports which promise that the Internet will "teleport the classroom into the target culture" and "go beyond classroom learning" have offered perhaps the false impression that as intercultural contact is now easier than ever, intercultural learning can also be achieved more easily.

If such an oversimplified approach is going to be rejected, it is therefore important to identify exactly *how* the new technologies can support intercultural approaches to foreign language learning and what skills and knowledge learners will need in order to develop their intercultural competence on-line. My intention is not to suggest that intercultural learning can only be achieved with the support of new technologies, but as computer-based methods are becoming more and more common, it is clear that, in the words of Kern, "it behooves us to understand the potential benefits and limitations of

these uses" (2000: 224). Therefore, a presentation of how culture has been represented in CALL materials over the past four decades will be followed by an examination of the reported characteristics of on-line language learning environments and an assessment of their possible contribution to intercultural language learning. In the process, some of the 'state of the art' contributions to on-line intercultural learning will be presented and treated as models for the methods and materials which will be put into use in the upcoming empirical research.

Following this, the next issue which this chapter turns to is what intercultural skills and knowledge learners need in order to engage successfully in intercultural learning on-line. It will be argued that these skills and knowledge form part of what is often referred to as 'electronic literacy' (Shetzer and Warschauer, 2000), or, in German, 'Medienkompetenz' (Moser, 2000). The extent to which these models take into account the intercultural aspects of communicating and working on-line will be examined in the final section of this chapter.

2.2 Early Approaches to CALL and Culture Learning

A review of how computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has been implemented in foreign language education over the years reveals that it has, to a great extent, reflected and developed along with the approaches to foreign language instruction which have been prominent at the different times. As new theories have emerged, the technologies of the time have been adapted and applied in ways which reflect the new approaches and methodologies. Similarly, as new attitudes and approaches to the role of culture in language learning have emerged, the design of CALL applications and activities have adapted themselves to these new trends. However, a surprisingly great deal of 'computer-assisted culture learning' (even on the Internet) seems to continue to use pedagogically out-dated approaches which rely on behaviouristic models of interaction and which supply oversimplified content about the target culture.

2.2.1 Behaviouristic CALL

The first CALL programs, which began to emerge in the 1960's, were based on the behaviouristic / audiolingual approaches to language learning which were prominent at the time. (This led Warschauer (1996a) to describe this period of CALL's history as 'Behaviouristic CALL'.) The audiolingual approach was based on the behaviouristic principles of Skinner's 'Verbal Behaviour' (1957) and laid its emphasis on the spoken form of language and on the belief that languages were best learned through repetition and the formation of habits. Language learners were therefore seen as needing a large number of repetitive language drills and the computer was considered the ideal provider of such activities. The computerised tutor, unlike its human counterpart, had endless patience, was never critical and permitted learners to work alone and thereby to progress at their own pace. In general, language learning programs of the time involved the computer posing questions for the learner based on grammar or vocabulary and then providing instant feedback to their responses. Levy (1997) reports that the first major CALL project – PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations) – was developed in the 1960's at the University of Illinois based on these principles and provided 50,000 hours of drill-based vocabulary and grammar activities for students of French and other languages. Other significant projects of the time included the Stanford

project which was a self-instructional computer course for learners of Russian. Learners were required to type answers to questions which were asked by the computer in Russian, to inflect words and to carry out various transformation exercises (Ahmad, Corbett, Rogers and Sussex, 1985). During this period, the sociocultural aspects of language learning do not seem to have played any sort of significant role in the content of CALL materials. The foreign language was usually presented in an unconnected manner and language learning tended to be equated with the mastering of grammatical and lexical items.

Many involved in the creation of drill and practice activities at the time saw the possibility of such work on the computer replacing the need for learners to attend language classes. Allen suggested that "there is a direct relationship between a student's ability in a language and the proportion of time he spends with a computer and that it is possible to decrease the amount of time spent in class and still progress at a normal rate, if students supplement their work with well designed programs on a computer" (1972: 48). Interestingly, 30 years on, such suggestions have arisen again with the suggestion that on-line language courses and CD-Rom based language software should be able to replace traditional classroom learning. Rekowski (2001) refers to some examples of this belief and the method descriptions of certain language schools also reflect this tendency.

However, by the 1980's the limited nature and low quality of such 'drill and kill' programs was being criticised by many writers in the field. Olsen (1980) pointed out that many teachers were unconvinced of the value of such programs and Kleinmann dismissed the majority of CALL products as "drill-practice and tutorial in nature, amounting to little more than electronic textbooks" (1987: 271). Nevertheless, drill and practice software has remained an important part of CALL software up until today and much of the language learning material available on the World Wide Web is of this nature, even though the methodology which lies behind it has long since been rejected by the language teaching community.

2.1.2 Communicative CALL

The 1980's witnessed the emergence of communicative language teaching and the microcomputer and both were to have important effects on the development of technology enhanced language learning. The relative cheapness of microcomputers meant that computing facilities became more easily available to the public and Ahmad et. al. reported at the time that the programs being sold with the micros "invariably include some language teaching programs" (1985: 35). Communicative language teaching was influenced by the work of Chomsky (1959) and Krashen (1982) and moved the focus of language learning from habit formation to bringing learners to develop their own mental construction of the second language system. Important characteristics of this development included increased acceptance of learners' interlanguage and a greater emphasis on the need for comprehensible input. Therefore, learning materials were now required to expose learners to meaningful language and to provide them with opportunities to construct their own knowledge of the foreign language.

Based on these principles, Underwood (1984) suggested that communicative CALL activities should, among other characteristics, focus on an implicit approach to grammar teaching, be flexible in the responses which it accepted, allow for learners to explore content and provide for both on- and off-screen tasks. Reflecting these requirements, CALL software from this period moved from the 'computer as tutor' function and focussed to a greater extent on the roles of 'tool' and 'stimulus' (Warschauer, 1996a). The 'computer as tool' function included text reconstruction software (such as 'hypercard' and 'storyboard') which allowed learners to complete or reorganise texts thereby helping them to develop their own mental construction of the foreign language. Multimedia simulations such as *The Dark Castle* (for learners of French) and *Simcity* reflected the 'computer as stimulus' function and were used to get learners to interact both with other learners and with the computer. These programs – usually in the form of games or adventures – often incorporated graphics, sound and video and allowed users to explore and make decisions based in simulated environments. They were seen as beneficial for language learning as they gave learners a genuine purpose for communicating and provided interesting and authentic input, thereby (according to the work of Krashen (1985)) allowing learners to acquire the language subconsciously.

The 1980's also saw CALL materials begin to pay more attention to the cultural aspects of language learning, if only on a superficial level, which used cultural content for motivational purposes rather than the development of intercultural or sociocultural competence. As was the general trend in FLT materials at the time (see 1.1.3), the target culture was often portrayed superficially and the software often placed learners in the role of tourists, requiring them to order meals or to check into hotels (Kenning and Kenning, 1990). One of the better known adventure games of the period, *London Adventure*, involved engaging learners in a last minute shopping expedition at the end of a holiday trip in the city. Similarly, the role-playing simulation *Montevidisco* required Spanish learners to play the role of a student exploring a hypothetical Mexican city. (A screen shot can be seen in fig. 2.1 below). Not only did the program locate the learner as a tourist in the foreign culture, but it also unashamedly focussed on American stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican culture. Some situations even involved offering bribes and getting thrown into jail. In defence of the program's approach to cultural stereotyping, one of the authors explained that:

"…it was written and filmed in 1982 long before hyper-political correctness came into vogue. It is true that much of the humour that makes *Montevidisco* enjoyable comes from gently poking fun at Mexicans, but it also pokes fun at Americans (and Russians)." (Bush, 1994: 16)

Fig. 2.1 Screen shot from Montevidisco

The common attitudes of the time that culture learning involved the learning of facts and figures and that the role of culture in CALL activities was to serve principally

as a motivational purpose is also clearly reflected in a paper by Klier (1985) in which culture learning is described as an "enrichment activity" and it is suggested that the "*l'ordre* of the language's grammar could be fortuitously complemented with *l'aventure* of random civilization lessons" (1987: 79). The computer program described in the paper (*Poker Pari*) is a multiple choice quiz program based on factual topics of French culture and history (see table 2.1 below). The computers function was seen as replacing the teacher as the quiz master and as acting as a "fair and impartial judge" (1987:80) as students were tested on their knowledge of French culture.

"Card" Topic Number	Topic Name
01	Grammar, elementary
02	Grammar, advanced
03	Vocabulary, elementary
04	Vocabulary, advanced
05	History, government and education
06	Literature (authors and their works)
07	France (Geography, cities, provinces and products
08	Monuments and masterpieces
09	Outstanding persons and their works (artists, musicians etc.)
10	Francophone countries
11 (Jack)	Paris
12 (Queen)	Quotes, proverbs and idioms
13 (King)	Kings, queens, castles
14 (Joker)	Wild card – anything goes

Table 2.1 An overview of topics from the French culture program Poker Pari (Klier, 1985: 81)

Of course not all computer-based language and culture learning of the time was of such nature and some examples of innovative uses of technologies for the purposes of developing language/culture awareness exist. Palmer (1987) reports on how the microcomputer was used to create graphic learning materials for Coeur d'Alene, an endangered American-Indian language. The materials were created through the collaboration of a native speaker and an anthropologist and were based on what Palmer describes as the 'culture language approach': "In the culture language approach the object is to teach culture and history through the presentation of culture-loaded items of native vocabulary" (1987: 51). The Macintosh paint program which the author used allowed him to create "figures illustrating traditional basketry and food plants" and in so

doing represented "the most comprehensive scheme of the culture language approach" (1987: 49).

The late 1980's also saw the emergence of interactive videodisc technology and this was seen as having great potential in conveying aspects of sociocultural information in a way which normal microcomputer programs were incapable of doing due to sound and graphic limitations. The videodisc's superior capability for presenting the sights and sounds of the foreign country and thereby providing a better contextualisation of communicative events led Coleman to claim that "no tool can convey the necessary input for socio-cultural competence as efficiently as video" (1991: 91). One of the most well-known and most highly-praised of the videodisc products was *A la rencontre de Phillipe*, a simulation which incorporated video, sound, graphics and texts to allow learners to explore Paris and solve the task of helping their friend to find a place to live. By clicking on various symbols and icons learners could watch portions of the video, ask for transcripts and subtitles, visit shops and flats and check newspaper advertisements. The program has been praised for its motivational value and the sense of realism which the video footage conveys (Kern, 2000) and Kramsch suggests that such programs "afford a type of learning that replicates non-pedagogical ways of acquiring knowledge that are radically different from traditional textbook learning" (1993: 199).

Despite such advances, by the turn of the decade commentators were questioning why the sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects of communicative competence were receiving so little attention by CALL materials in comparison to the great deal of material which existed for developing grammatical competence. Kenning and Kenning suggested that it was due to the fact that the social and cultural side of language "presents a greater challenge to the imagination and skills of authors than devising systems to improve grammatical competence" (1990: 39). They also pointed out that there was still a general lack of understanding about the sociocultural rules of language:

> "The list of functions and descriptions of appropriateness available simply do not compare with the wealth of information that has been gathered about the components of grammatical competence." (ibid: 39)

However, criticism of communicative CALL was not limited to the limited role of sociocultural elements in the software. Despite the increasing variety of uses which CALL was put to in the 1980's (i.e. the functions of tool and of stimulus), much criticism continued to emerge from both practitioners and researchers as regards to the general quality of the programs and their manner of implementation in the classroom. Levy (1997) suggests the inferior quality of materials produced during the decade was due to the fact that many products were being developed by teachers who were unaware of how to make full use of the medium and who did not base their work on current theory. In reference to how CALL was being implemented in classes, Warschauer and Kern complain that computers at the time were used in "an ad hoc and disconnected fashion" (2000:10) and even at the time, many recognised the need for CALL activities to be integrated into class work as a whole and to move away from programs which required students to work on their own with the computer (Farrington, 1986; Jones, 1986). Rüschoff, in his article on the state of the art of information technology in language learning at the time, was critical of the superficial content of many CALL products, suggesting that there was an overemphasis on factual linguistic knowledge and consequently, a neglect of the strategies of language processing and production which were necessary for students to develop their language ability (1993: 6).

2.3 CALL and the Cultural Dimension in the 1990's

In the 1990's and up to the present day, the area of foreign language education has been influenced, on a technical level, by the emergence of Internet and CD ROM technologies and pedagogically, by both constructivist and sociocognitive approaches to learning. While many differences exist between these two perspectives, it is clear that both have coincided in the need to move away from models of instruction which consider the classroom as a place where information is transferred from teacher to learner. In the information age society it is considered unrealistic to see the function of education as the teaching of facts, and instead they suggest that "the ultimate aim of teaching and learning will be to assist learners in their need to develop strategies of knowledge retrieval, production and dissemination" (Rüschoff, 1999: 80). The other main underlying principles of these approaches will be briefly looked at now, before attempting to identify how they have influenced the design and execution of CALL materials, and in particular technology assisted work on the cultural component of language learning.

2.3.1 Constructivist and Sociocognitive Approaches

Similar to the input perspectives of the previous decade, constructivism considers language learning to be principally cognitive in nature, however learning is now considered to be a much more active process in which new meaning and understanding is constructed through the interplay between new incoming information and what is already known by the learner. Constructivism therefore sees the learning process not so much as a transfer of information, but rather as "a process of information gathering and knowledge processing" (Rüschoff, 1999: 83) in which new and previously acquired information interact to produce knowledge and understanding (see also Wolff, 2002). Learning scenarios most ideally suited to this approach give learners the opportunity to theorize, predict and experiment based on their current understanding and then bring them to draw new conclusions and thereby develop new knowledge and skills when the findings of their experiments fail to fit their current concepts and theories (Feldman, Conold and Coulter, 2000). A common example of a CALL activity based on a constructivist approach is concordancer work, which involves learners developing and testing their own hypothesis about a grammar rule based on the analysis of a list of

authentic examples taken from a computer corpus of authentic texts (Rüschoff and Wolff, 1999). However, many web-based activities have also been shown to reflect constructivist principles (Felix, 2002; Weasenforth, Biesenbach and Meloni, 2002).

While constructivists tend to attribute great importance to the role of learners in constructing their own knowledge, sociocognitive approaches tend to underline how knowledge is co-constructed by learners through interaction with others (Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen, 1998). These approaches have their origins in the work of Hymes (1972), Halliday (1973) and Canale and Swain (1980) and see learning and cognition as principally social, not autonomous acts. The American sociologist Dell Hymes proposed the term 'communicative competence' as an alternative to Chomsky's linguistic competence and thereby highlighted the importance of the social and functional rules of language. The concept was further developed by Canale and Swain (1980) (and later by Canale, 1983) in their model of communicative competence which combined grammatical and discourse competences with sociolinguistic and strategic competences. This greater emphasis on the social nature of language use and language acquisition has led to a shift away in the belief that language instruction should focus on comprehensible input and instead it proposes that language teachers need to look for opportunities to involve learners in the speech communities of the target language and thereby allow them to experience and learn the genres and discourses of that language. Methodologies which have been proposed to achieve these goals include task-based learning (Prabhu, 1987; Willis, 1996), project-based learning (Legutke and Thomas, 1991) and content-based learning (Baetens-Beardsmore, 1993). Intercultural language learning, as described here in chapter one, can also be situated within the tradition of sociocognitive approaches due to the strong focus on learning and development through social interaction, the importance attributed to language's location within a social context and the belief that the learning process should involve the development of strategies and skills which learners can refer to again and again as opposed to the transfer from teacher to student of isolated facts and linguistic knowledge.

Remaining within the tradition of sociocognitive learning, recent years have seen renewed interest in how the sociocultural theory based on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) can be applied to foreign language instruction (Kinginger, 2002; Lantolf, 2000; Warschauer, 1997). The Vygotskian perspective

highlights the importance of the social environment in the learning process and learners' higher psychological functions are seen as being internalised during social interaction. Vygotsky put forward the concept of the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) to explain how the environment can be structured to make it possible for learners to move from one stage of development to the next. The ZPD is defined as:

> "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygostky, 1978: 86)

However, writers such as van Lier (1996) and Kinginger (2002) hasten to warn against oversimplified interpretations of the ZPD which simply consider it as a manner of adding the social environment to input approaches to language learning or as a justification for behaviouristic modes of interaction in the classroom. Instead, the authors argue, interaction is seen not merely as a process of conveying knowledge (as in Krashen's input hypothesis), but instead, learners should be seen as entering into "a dialectical relationship with new material, a process that inevitably leads to transformation of both the learner and the material (Kinginger, 2002: 247)". The ZPD also involves more than input models of language learning as it aims to bring about the progressive transfer of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learner. This is clear in Bruner's definition of the term 'scaffolding', which is seen as further developing the concept of the ZPD:

> "a process of setting up the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it." (Bruner, 1983: 60)

Seen through sociocognitive perspectives, technology is both a tool and a resource for the social construction of knowledge and understanding. On-line technologies enable language learners to analyse, create and take an active part in the discourse communities of their target language. Mailing lists and message boards frequented by native speakers allow learners the opportunity to participate in authentic speech communities of the target language, while publications in the World Wide Web (WWW) by the media, businesses and government bodies provide learners with examples of authentic discourse which can be studied for aspects of genre and style. The Internet also offers students the possibility to publish web pages based on their own

lives, home environments and research projects and thereby use their knowledge of the target language to take an active part in this on-line multilingual community. Curiously, these opportunities for engaging students in on-line social interaction have been taken up with such eagerness by foreign language educators and researchers that it has led some observers to suggest that the general shift from cognitive to sociocognitive approaches has been, to a certain extent at least, brought about by their experiences with the technology:

> "network technologies have helped to initiate a significant pedagogical shift, moving many language arts educators from cognitivistic assumptions about knowledge and learning as a brain phenomenon, to contextual, collaborative, and social-interactive approaches to language development and activity." (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002: 85)

The following sub-section looks at the role which culture has played in this modern context.

2.3.2 Constructivist and Sociocognitive Approaches and Culture

The influence of constructivist and sociocognitive approaches and the availability of CD ROM and on-line technologies since the mid-1990's has increased the potential for effective intercultural learning in the foreign language classroom by enabling swift access to information on the target culture and by facilitating contact with its members. However, in the case of computer assisted intercultural learning, the fact that a large gap exists between 'potential' and 'achievement' cannot be emphasised enough. The fact that teachers have had access to information and communication technologies over the past decade should not imply that firstly, they have taken up the opportunities which these technologies offer, and secondly, that the culture learning which they have engaged in has been based on sound pedagogical principles. A large scale survey carried out by Moore et. al. found that language teachers in the USA were "making minimal use of technological facilities for teaching culture" (1998: 120). This was reported to be due to a lack of facilities and also a lack of access to suitable material for culture learning. The authors complain of the continued neglect of the cultural aspects of language by CALL materials and they suggest that the models of culture learning being used in the area did not reflect current methodologies:

"The sparse work done on computer enhanced culture learning focuses primarily on products and practices and follows the same model of interacting with native speakers for the purpose of getting information on holidays, celebrations, food, celebrity figures, music, and so forth…" (ibid: 121)

Examples of the 'facts and figures' approach to culture learning of which Moore et. al. are so critical abound in the literature and the CALL materials of the 1990's. Osuna and Meskill (1998) report on an Internet-based project for students of Spanish which involved learners visiting authentic Spanish language websites in order to complete tasks such as arranging a trip to Madrid and creating an authentic Mexican meal. Such activities, while not being without motivational and didactic value, do little to increase learners' understanding of the foreign culture on anything but a superficial level and are unlikely to contribute to any change in cultural perspective. For example, while students may be able to visit a site on Mexican food and, based on this, create a menu for an 'authentic Mexican meal', it is unlikely that this exercise will make them aware of why this particular food is typical in Mexico and what associations and connotations the different food types may have for a Mexican or how the social and cultural contexts determine the way the food is prepared or how the table is laid. Instead, learners will see the websites and the aspect of Mexican culture which it depicts with the eyes of a tourist or an outsider and are unlikely to experience it as anything more than exotic or strange.

A similar approach is adopted by Lafford and Lafford (1997) in their paper on using Internet technologies for language and culture learning. The authors base their proposals for web-based activities on a definition of culture which deals only with products and practices and which fails to take into account the cultural values and perspectives which underlie such expressions of culture or the intercultural skills of investigation and analysis which are necessary to identify and understand them. They sum up their approach to cultural dimension of foreign language learning and the Internet in the following way:

- "Informational [culture]: Web sites are full of reference information about the culture (e.g. encyclopaedias, daily newspapers).
- Behavioral [culture]: Web sites include newspaper editorials on cultural behavior, video and audio clips of interviews with leaders of the target culture society in which appropriate conversational and kinesic behavior is modeled (e.g., discourse strategies used to open, maintain, and close a conversation, appropriate gestures).

- Achievement [culture]: Web sites offer virtual tours of art museums, music clips, poems, literacy works, and the like – elements of culture that may be hard to access without actually visiting the target culture." (1997: 221)

While there is definitely some justification for this type of work in the area of culture and while the Internet does offer numerous opportunities for this, the outline falls well short of being a complete approach for engaging in intercultural learning on the Internet. Nevertheless, many websites seem to follow the same definition as Lafford and Lafford when it comes to offering material for culture learning online. Culture is often equated with slang and dialectic aspects of the foreign language (see, for example, the *Cutting Edge* textbook's website on language and culture[1]) while other sites imply that culture work involves the description of superficial facts about the holidays, traditions and recipes in different countries (see, for example, the *Exchange* website[2]).

However, it is important to point out that the past decade has also seen the emergence of on-line culture learning which are based on the principles of intercultural approaches (as outlined in section1.3) and which attempt to fully exploit the interactive features of information and communication technologies in order to provide rich opportunities for intercultural collaboration and ethnographic investigation. An example of such on-line activities can be Webquests.

A webquest is defined as "an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing" (Dodge, 1995:n.p.). The tasks usually involve students working together in groups to analyse a collection of materials on the Internet and then transforming the information they have read and interacted with into a new product of some kind. (For a more detailed account of the structure and content of Webquests see the Webquest homepage[3]). Webquests are usually aimed at developing higher level thinking skills (Marzano, 1992) such as constructing support for arguments, abstracting underlying themes and principles from information or analysing different perspectives in authentic materials. Such activities can be ideally suited for the

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[1] http://www.longman.com/cuttingedge/teachers/language.html

[2] http://deil2.lang.uiuc.edu/ExChange3/

[3] http://webquest.sdsu.edu/

development of the intercultural skills of interpreting and relating as well as critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997a). For example, in the Webquest 'Comparative Democracy' (Wenninger, 2002), students have to explore and compare the concept of democracy in the USA and in other countries. Working initially in groups within their own classes, students examine on-line authentic materials related to state institutions such as the courts, the military and the press. From this research they are expected to identify the role of democracy in these institutions. They then send their findings via e-mail to partner classes in other countries who have been carrying out the same research on their own countries' institutions. A web page may also be created were all the classes can publish their results together. Carrying out such a webquest can, firstly, enable learners to identify the underlying principles and interpretations of democracy in the on-line materials provided by their state's institutions (i.e. interpreting cultural information) and secondly, by comparing their information with partner classes in other countries, students are able to appreciate the different cultural interpretations of the concept of democracy (i.e. relating information and critical cultural awareness).

In 1990, in reference to the general influence of CALL on the area of foreign language teaching, Kenning and Kenning described this area of practice as being "far from… widespread" and as failing "to make real inroads into language teaching practice on the ground" (1990: 12). Thirteen years later and the situation would appear to have improved to a certain extent. This is undoubtedly due to one particular development of the 1990's: the emergence of the Internet as an accessible and user-friendly tool for both students and teachers of foreign languages (Eastment, 1996; Warschauer and Healey, 1998). However, as the examples shown above clearly illustrate, the Internet has been used to support both new and old approaches to culture learning. Roche (2001) rightly suggests that while the mediums have changed over the decades, the methodologies behind the programs have often remained the same.

The following section looks in more detail at the characteristics of on-line language learning environments and their particular form of electronic discourse - computer-mediated communication – and investigates in what ways Internet-based language learning scenarios may best contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence in language learners.

2.4 Network-Based Language Teaching and Intercultural Learning

Since its emergence in the early 1990's, the Internet has been quickly and eagerly taken up by educators as both a tool and a medium for foreign language education (Crystal, 2001). Apart from many reports of good practice, a great deal of research has been produced on the effects of an on-line environment on the language teaching and language learning process. Much of this research has focussed on the characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) which is defined by Herring as "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" (1999: 1). Warschauer (1997:471) identifies five key characteristics which differentiate computer-mediated communication from other forms of communication. CMC is firstly text-based and computer-mediated; it involves many-to-many communication; it is time and place independent; it can take place over long distance, and finally, it is distributed via hyperlinks.

While these may be the functional characteristics of the medium itself, another set of characteristics can be identified in the literature which are related to the quality and content of foreign language learning which is carried out on-line. Network-based language teaching (NBLT) is the term commonly used to refer to language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks (Belz, 2001; Warschauer and Kern, 2000). The technologies most commonly used in NBLT include non-synchronous communication tools (such as e-mail and on-line discussion boards), synchronous tools (such as web-based videoconferencing, chats and MOO's) as well as the World Wide Web (WWW).

Based on my review of the literature, it would appear that NBLT can be particularly beneficial for foreign language education, and in particular the development of ICC, in the following ways:

- It supports a combination of interaction and reflection

- It brings about more equal levels of participation between learners

- It provides an authentic environment for learners

- It facilitates the collaborative construction of knowledge

- It allows learners to work with hypermedia products

- It facilitates intercultural contact

The following sub-sections investigate these characteristics of NBLT and it will be considered how they may contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence. Furthermore, examples of on-line intercultural learning will be examined to assess whether a progression from communicative approaches to computer-assisted culture learning to intercultural approaches can be identified. As asynchronous telecollaboration (via e-mail and discussion boards etc.) is of particular interest to this study, the relevance of these characteristics to asynchronous telecollaboration will be referred to on a regular basis. Tools for synchronous text-based communication, such as chats, MOO's and Local Area Networks, were not used in the action research studies due to practical reasons. These will therefore be mentioned less frequently, however it is not my intention to take away from their importance in NBLT. The contribution of web-based videoconferencing will be dealt with separately in chapter six as this is not a text-based medium and, as such, distinguishes itself greatly from the other technologies which are discussed in this chapter.

2.4.1 Interaction and Reflection

Until the emergence of the Internet, most synchronous intercultural interaction took place on a face-to-face level or by telephone, meaning that when it ended, there were few opportunities to reflect on what had happened during the exchange or perhaps to discover why communication breakdown had occurred. This was a particular problem for students attempting to engage in intercultural language learning during stays abroad in the foreign culture (Coleman, 1998) or in tandem learning scenarios (Brammerts, 2001). How were learners expected to analyse and learn from their encounters with the foreign culture without having to record and transcribe all their interactions? It would

appear that on-line learning environments and CMC may provide an answer to this problem as they allow learners to interact with others and then reflect on this interaction at their own pace and also to save, print-out and edit the transcripts if necessary. Warschauer explains this feature in the following way:

> "For the first time in history, human interaction now takes place in a text-based form--what's more, a computer-mediated form that is easily transmitted, stored, archived, re-evaluated, edited, and rewritten. The opportunities to freeze a single frame and focus attention on it are thus multiplied greatly. The students' own interactions can now become a basis for epistemic engagement. The historical divide between speech and writing has been overcome with the interactional and reflective aspects of language merged in a single medium." (1997: 472)

Researchers and educators have found this aspect of CMC makes an important contribution to the style and quality of learning which takes place on-line. Kreef-Peyton (1999) found that asynchronous on-line writing allowed learners to reflect on and learn from contributions of others and thereby provided what the author described as an "interactional scaffold" (1999: 19). Kamhi-Stein (2000) found that discussion board interaction allowed learners to pace their learning as they had access to a visible record of discussions which could be easily retrieved in text format. Weasenforth et. al. (2002) reported that threaded discussions on discussion boards promoted more coherent interaction among learners as the extra time which asynchronous interaction allows readers was seen to encourage them to review and respond to their classmates' postings.

However, in order to maximise the potential of the reflective process, it becomes clear that CMC-based learning activities need to be fully integrated into the classroom and teachers need to play an active role in bringing about the appropriate learning situations (Bennett et. al., 1999). Weasenforth et. al. (2002) found in their literacy classes that learning was most successful when students were given opportunities to discuss and reflect on extracts from the discussion board interactions during their contact classes. Instructors brought printed-out extracts from the on-line forums to class and used these as the basis for reflection and also as an illustration of how to link ideas and engage in critical thinking. The authors reported that such reflective activities based on the students' own on-line interactions helped to focus students' performances and to make learners more aware of what was required of them (2002: 73). Such findings are supported by the work of Feldman et. al. (2000) who attempted to identify the reasons

for the perceived failure of the web-based 'Network Science' project. The initiative involved secondary-level science classes throughout the USA collecting data in their local areas and then sharing it with other schools via on-line networks. The authors found that one of the principal failings of the project had been to expect that learning would primarily happen on-line. Instead, their research showed that the main community of learners was the students' own classroom in which they were able to engage in intensive dialogue with other learners about the information they had received on-line and to learn the necessary skills of inquiry and analysis from their teacher. The authors conclude:

> "It is only the teacher who can set the stage in the classroom for students to engage the ideas of others and thereby fosters the kind of thoughtful, reflective discussion that characterizes learning; through questioning, the teacher helps students develop their own understanding further …"(2000: 17)

A good example of how intercultural language learning can benefit from the combination of interaction and reflection in on-line learning environments – and how it is important for this reflection to take place within the supportive structure of the classroom – can be found in the Cultura project[4] (Furstenberg, Levet, English and Maellet, 2001). This on-line platform uses the possibility of juxtaposing materials from different cultures together on web pages in order to offer a comparative approach to investigating cultural differences. The authors report that in their application of the project, third-level language learners from France and the USA complete on-line questionnaires related to their cultural values and associations. These questionnaires can be based on word associations (*What words do you associate with the word 'police'?*), sentence completions (*A good citizen is someone who...*), or reactions to situations (*You see a mother hitting her child in the supermarket. How do you feel?*). Each group fills out the questionnaire in their native language. Following this, the results from both sets of students are then compiled (by computer) and presented on-line. Under the guidance of their teachers in contact classes, students then analyse the juxtaposed lists in order to find general differences and similarities between the two groups' responses. After the analyses, students from both countries meet in an on-line forum to discuss their findings and to get a better understanding of the cultural values and beliefs which may lie behind

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[4] http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/

the differences in the lists. In addition to the questionnaires, learners are also supplied with a great deal of on-line resources such as opinion polls and press articles from the two cultures which can support them in their investigation and understanding of their partner class' responses.

The authors report that this contrastive approach helps learners to become more aware of the complex relationship between culture and language and enables them to develop a method for understanding a foreign culture. While the data for cultural analysis and learning are produced on-line, the role of contact classes and the teacher are considered vital in helping the learners to identify cultural similarities and differences and also in bringing about reflection on the outcomes of the students' investigations on the Cultura platform. The authors explain:

> "Uncovering the hidden structure of semantic networks is an essential form of *teacher-induced mediation* to help students grapple with the powerful juxtaposition of raw cultural items. This is the basic philosophy of Cultura since greater cross-cultural understanding, hence literacy, *does not automatically come about via computer-mediated communication."* (2001: 75) (Italics added)

The images on the following pages illustrate four stages in the Cultura learning process. First of all, students fill out their responses to the questionnaire on-line. Their answers are then collected and juxtaposed with the answers of their partner class. In class, differences and similarities are then discussed and general trends begin to emerge. Finally, the students from both classes meet in an on-line forum to compare their findings. (All screen shots have been taken from the Cultura homepage.[5])

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[5] http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/).
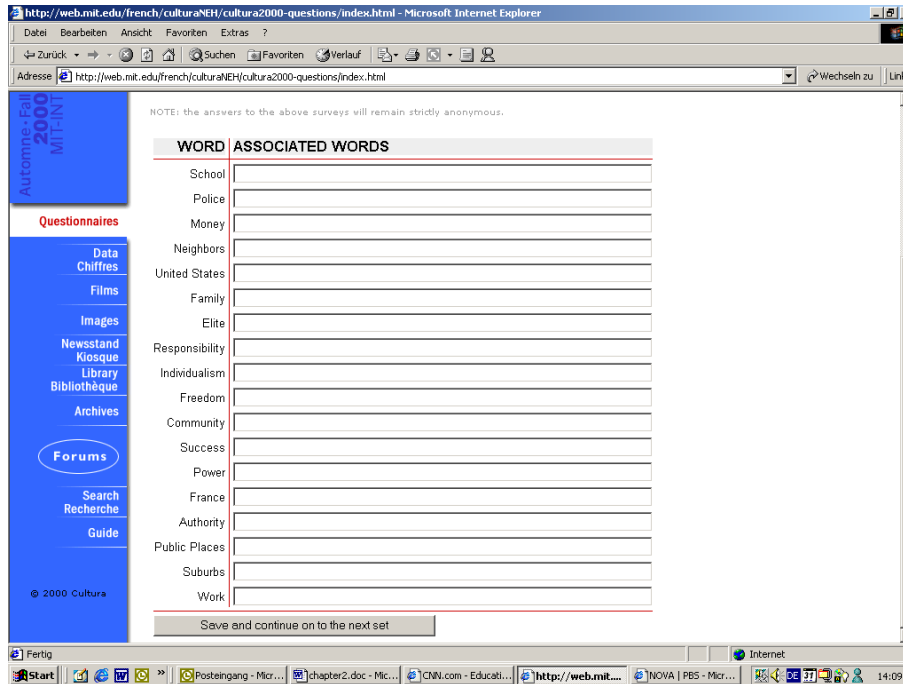
Fig. 2.2 Stage One: Templates for on-line questionnaires are completed by both groups on-line
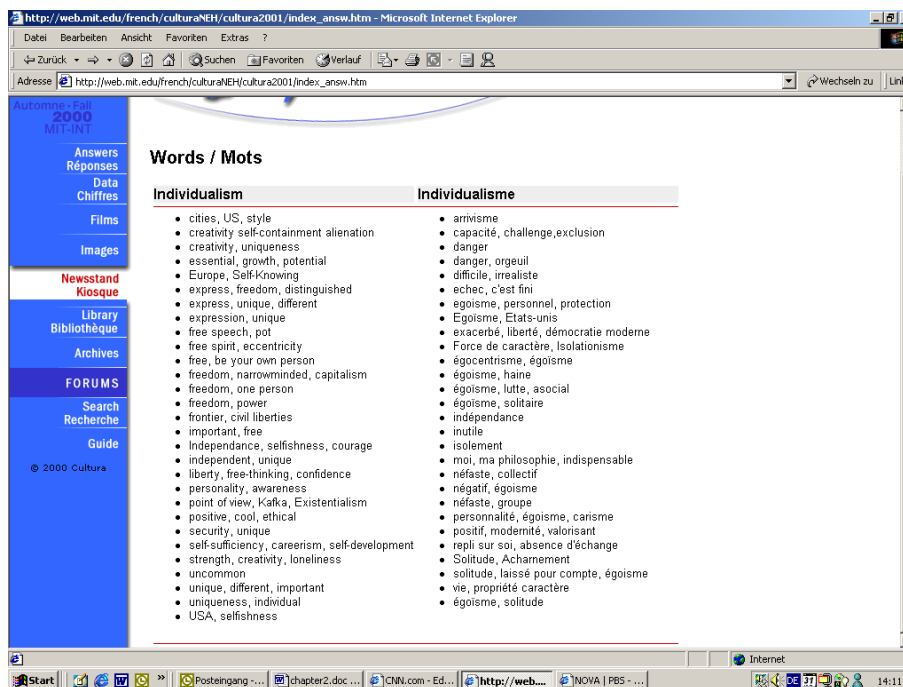
Fig. 2.3 Stage Two: Results of on-line questionnaires are juxtaposed together
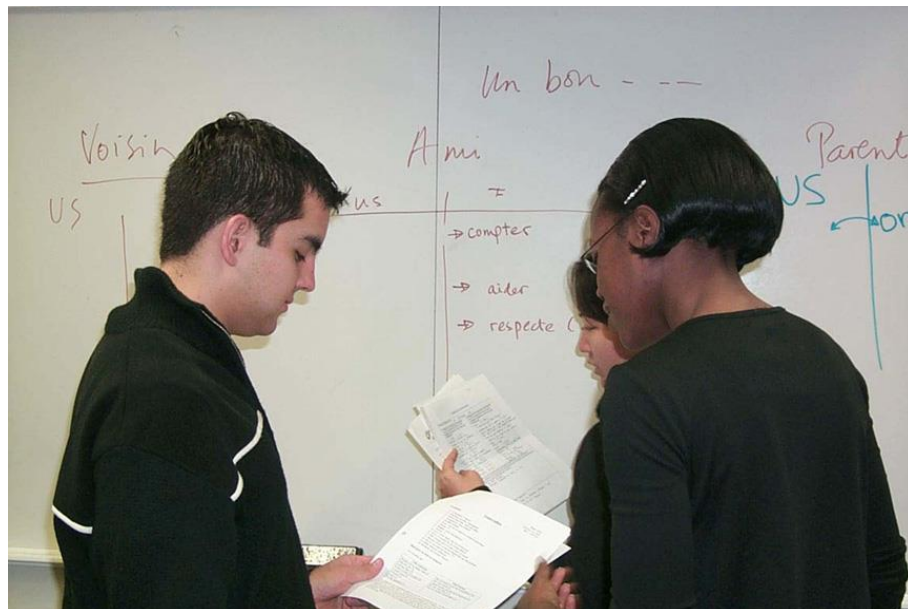
Fig. 2.4 and 2.5 Stage Three: Students and teacher analyse results of questionnaires
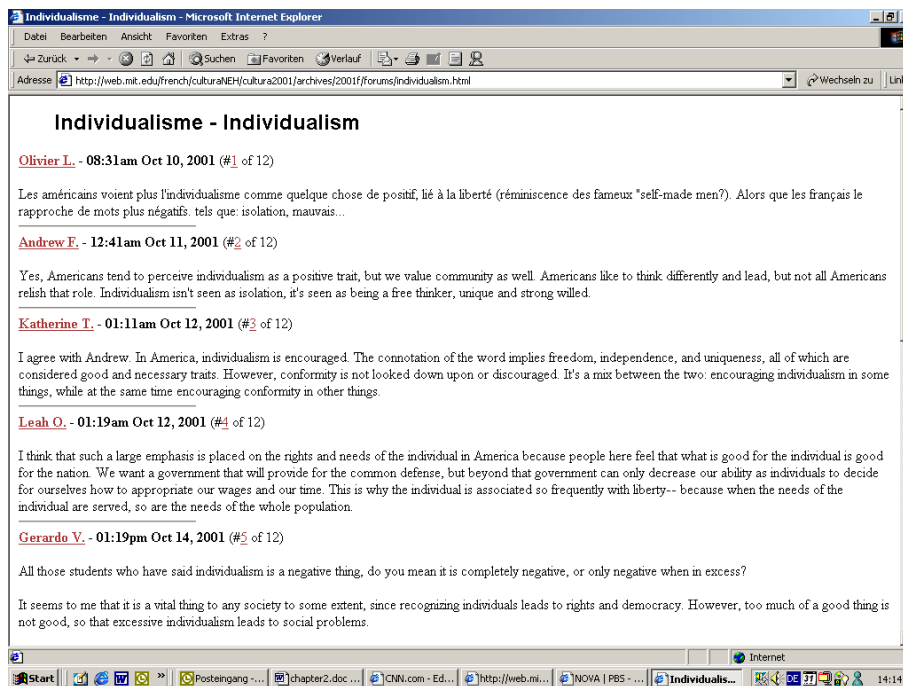
Fig. 2.6 Stage Four: Results are discussed by both groups in on-line forum

For many years the expression *'from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side'* has been used to describe the changing role of teachers in the technology-enhanced classroom, where their function is seen to be that of "a facilitator of knowledge rather than the font of wisdom" (Warschauer and Healey, 1998: 57). However, I would question the usefulness of such a term as it tends to imply a certain passivity in the role of the teacher which the examples referred to above show to be clearly inaccurate. It is clear that the now clichéd expression 'guide on the side' vastly oversimplifies the situation of teachers moving from transmission to constructivist approaches in the language classroom. Voller (1997) identifies a tendency in modern foreign language teaching pedagogies to attempt the marginalisation or exclusion of the teacher from the language learning process and perhaps such terminology reflects this tendency. Particularly in the area of student exchanges (both on-line and face-to-face), the role of the teacher is, according to Grau, "lediglich 'am Rande' mit bedacht und erwähnt" (2001: 63). However, a glance at the different tasks and roles which teachers must undertake when carrying out an e-mail exchange or an on-line course (see O'Dowd, 2003 and Bennett et. al., 1999 for examples of each respectively) demonstrate that the teacher is required to be much more than a facilitator of knowledge or a resource provider.

Research on one of the best known networks of intercultural e-mail exchanges – the Tandem Network (Brammerts and Little, 1996) has concentrated principally on the development of autonomy in language learners. However, the literature in this area is careful to give adequate recognition to the role of the teacher in e-mail exchanges and in the development of autonomous learners, pointing out the need for personal guidance, worksheets and in-class activities in order to assist students in defining goals, understanding content and developing language awareness (Brammerts and Little, 1996; Kleppin, 1997). A recently developed web-based learning environment for Tandem exchanges (Appel and Mullen, 2000) allows teachers access to statistics and the content of their students' Tandem exchanges, thereby offering teachers the opportunity to integrate the interaction between students into their classes more easily. However, within the Tandem literature, I feel it is necessary to take issue with Schwienhorst (2000) who claims that: "The teacher's role as a dispenser of knowledge disappears almost completely in tandem learning" (2000: 88). I would suggest that, particularly in the case of cultural knowledge, this is unlikely to be the case. Although students may be writing to partners in the target culture who are 'experts' in their own culture, their expertise is often on an unconscious level and while they may be able to tell their partner about cultural products and practices in their home country, they may not be able to identify or articulate the reasoning and cultural values which underlie these elements. Hence, teachers in such cases may need to resume their role as 'dispensers of knowledge' (a role which Voller describes more positively as "the teacher as expert (1997: 105)") as they offer their learners different interpretations of what their partners might have intended in their mails and also suggest other readings of what the students themselves write in their own messages. Of course, as Brown warns, presenting learners with this information is not sufficient and that learners require opportunities to reflect on material, check their understanding with that of their classmates and to make connections to other knowledge (1997: 115)

Reflecting Brown's point, Feldman et. al. (2000) make a concrete proposal as to how teachers can help learners to engage in the collaborative construction of knowledge. The following table is an overview of some of the techniques which teachers can practise in a technology-enhanced classroom in order to bring about what they describe as 'reflective discourse':

Teacher Behaviour	Teacher Objective
Encourage students to formulate and express their own theories	Students learn to offer possible explanations rather than recite correct answers
Encourage students to ask one another for clarifications and elaborations	Students come to assume responsibility for understanding one another
Give non-evaluative responses	Students come to see themselves as having authority to judge answers
Redirect questions to other students	Students come to see themselves as capable of answering many of their own questions
Engage students in making predictions from their theories	Students learn to evaluate theories by testing predictions
Allow sufficient wait times	Students come to value thoughtful comments that may require time to formulate

Table 2.2 Behaviour and Objectives of Reflective Discourse (Feldman et. al., 2000:81)

Applying such pedagogical techniques in the computer-assisted culture learning classroom will encourage learners to understand culture learning as an active process, rather than as a simple transfer of information from teacher to learner. They will develop their own theories about aspects of the intercultural communication in which they are engaged and learn to evaluate and test the theories of others in the process. In short, intercultural language learning becomes a collaborative process where understanding of the foreign culture is constructed through interaction with the teacher and fellow learners, using the developing on-line relationship to members of the target culture as the raw material upon which the learning is based.

2.4.2 Equal Levels of Participation

Much of the research on CMC has claimed that both asynchronous and synchronous forms help to bring about more equal levels of participation between learners than would normally occur in face-to-face interaction. This relates to shy and outgoing students, high and low level status groups (such as academics and students) as well as male and female participation (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991; Warschauer, 1996). This change in behaviour is attributed to the fact that aspects of peoples' identity such as their race, gender, social class and accent are hidden in the text-based environment of e-mail and other on-line communication tools. As a consequence, the participation levels of those who may be likely to bear the brunt of racism or sexism or some other form of

discrimination in face-to-face intercultural contact are increased (Simmons, 1998; Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen, 1998). Researchers have also suggested that another important aspect of the 'reduced social dimension' (Coverdale-Jones, 1998) is the absence of non-verbal cues such as frowning and hesitating and that this also contributes to making CMC a less intimidating environment and thereby encourages those individuals or cultures which are less dominant to play a greater role in interaction (Salaberry, 1996). Warschauer (1997) offers the example of Japanese school children who are usually expected in their culture to take a passive rather than an active role in class and therefore tend not to participate in class discussions. CMC, he claims, offers these students an opportunity to make a contribution to a discussion without going against this cultural norm.

This characteristic of CMC, in theory at least, can be seen as advantageous for on-line intercultural learning scenarios as it implies that groups from different cultures in contact together on-line will interact on a more 'equal footing' than they might in a face-to-face situation, thereby increasing the potential for an intense and honest process of interaction in which neither group is 'dominated' by the other. In particular, students who are shy or who are not confident in using the target language with native speakers are likely to contribute more to on-line intercultural exchanges than in 'face-to-face' scenarios. Simmons summarises this particular advantage of working and learning in a virtual intercultural environment in the following way:

> "Skin colours and other biases based on visual factors will be minimised. Individuals who by ethnicity or personality are less outspoken in face-to-face situations may contribute more abundantly to news groups and forums … where they enjoy anonymity or less exposure." (1998: 14)

Salman (2000), in her publication on teaching and learning on-line, appears to go a step further when she suggests that thanks to the egalitarian nature of on-line communication "existing hierarchies and relationships can change and even fade" (2000: 19). In other words, the author appears to be claiming that the nature of CMC can somehow allow people to interact together in ways which they would not want to, or would not be able to, if they were in a face-to-face environment.

However, there are reasons why this characteristic may not be as advantageous for on-line intercultural learning as might be imagined at first glance. Firstly, it has been

called into question whether CMC does indeed make interaction more 'democratic' by hiding aspects of identity such as gender, race or culture. The extensive research of Herring (1996) reveals that interaction on the Internet is actually dominated by a male discourse style which is based on the principles of debate, freedom from rules and adversarial argumentation. Furthermore, Herring also maintains that internet users do generally reveal their gender by their style of interaction on-line, and that their gender-related characteristics may even be exaggerated in on-line environments (1996:4). Similarly, other research has rejected the suggestion that there is anything culturally homogenous about the Internet and CMC (Hongladarom, 1999; Guo-Ming Chen, 1998) and it has been suggested that learners from different cultures use different "patterns" (Kim and Bonk, 2002) or "genres of discourse" (Kramsch and Thorn, 2002) when they interact on-line. Therefore, Murray concludes that "the research so far contradicts the predictions of many commentators that CMC would create a more equal site for communication" (2000: 413). The social, gender, cultural and racial aspects of identity appear to continue to show themselves in on-line discourse and do actually influence how people interact on-line.

Secondly, one may question the value of intercultural interaction which comes about through the disguising or hiding of aspects of one's identity and the consequent avoidance of bias and prejudice, rather than through a constructive dialogue which deals with these issues in a direct and honest manner. In their theoretical work on the role of media-based communication in dialogism, Tella & Mononen-Aaltonens' (1998) definition of dialogue refers to interaction between individuals or cultures which produces a genuine change or shift in their way of viewing the world. (In many ways this is similar to Bredella's interpretation of intercultural understanding.) The authors identify mutual respect as a vital element of dialogic interaction, yet they curiously go on to say the following:

> Different kinds of things connected to race, gender, religion etc, can be powerful impediments to dialogism as well. As an example of CMHC [Computer Mediated Human Communication] that does away with various artefacts is email, which lets people communicate across age, gender, geographical barriers etc." (1998: 91)

Is the implication here that CMC sometimes facilitates dialogue because the participants may be unaware of aspects of each other's identity? If so, then it is

questionable whether mutual respect ever really becomes an issue and whether true intercultural dialogue is ever really achieved. The real challenge of intercultural interaction, on-line or face-to-face, is to come to terms with the differences found in the other culture which one may initially wish to reject. If these differences remain hidden in the on-line environment (with the help of text-based communication) then true dialogue, authentic intercultural communication and the consequent changes in the interlocutors' perspective are never likely to come about.

Sayers (1995) describes an e-mail exchange between two classes which illustrates these issues quite well. In the exchange, an American group of learners exchanged mails with a group from Quebec for over a year and a half in order to carry out various parallel learning projects. The exchange is reported to have worked extremely well and the American group are said to have considered their Quebecois partners "competent and highly-proficient models for learning French" (1995, n.p.). It was not until the two groups met at the end of the exchange that the American students realised that their partner class actually consisted of deaf children who studied in a brail school. No doubt Sayers recounts this anecdote in an attempt to show the ability of CMC to allow communication to take place without it being hindered by the prejudices which learners might have towards handicapped students. However, there appears to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the organisers to hide information from the learners and this may take away from the ultimate value of the project. It is fair to speculate that the American learners would have benefited more from the exchange knowing from the beginning that their partners had a disability but were still going to be able to take part successfully in their project. In any case, CMC can be seen here to have been employed in order to avoid challenging stereotypes and prejudice, rather than in order to confront them.

In contrast to this approach, I would suggest that classes engaged in exchanges should operate on an premise of honesty and that exchanges are begun by an exchange of photos, websites or videos in which the students and their local surroundings are described. On-line intercultural communication should provide students with the opportunity to practise dealing with the prejudices, stereotypes and myths which they hold about other cultures and which others may hold about them. Presenting on-line communication as an "utopian middle landscape…unfettered by historical, geographical, national or institutional identities" (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002: 85) is, in

the long term, inaccurate, unrealistic and fails to exploit the medium to its full potential. Moore (2002) would appear to be in agreement with this position and rejects the suggestion in the literature that there is something inherent in the nature of CMC which brings about the reduction of prejudice: "If technology challenges social roles, then it is because social change has allowed those roles to be challenged" (2002: 22). He also warns that voice and video-based technologies will eventually take away any possibilities for hiding aspects of race, gender or culture which CMC might have offered until now.

However, this does not mean that a certain amount of 'anonymity' or 'distance' which learners may experience in on-line communication will not benefit shy or weak learners in their telecollaborative projects with members of another culture. This particular advantage of text-based communication tools will become particularly evident in chapter six when students engage in intercultural communication using both e-mail and videoconferencing.

2.4.3 Authenticity

The motivational power of bringing learners into contact with an authentic audience on-line has been widely recognised in the CALL literature (Rosenberg, 1994; Otto, 1997; Slaouti, 1998; Tillyer, 1996). Furthermore, engaging learners in communication with a real audience about topics which are of relevance to their own lives and cultures can also be seen to hold potential for intercultural learning. If learners know that their contributions to the interaction and publications of the Internet will be taken seriously by an authentic audience, then they may reflect more about themselves and their own culture and how they wish to see this presented to the outside world.

Johnston defines an authentic audience as one which is "concerned exclusively with the meaning of the speaker's message" (1999: 60) and believes that the rise of computer-mediated forms of interaction has greatly increased the potential audience for students' communications and publications on-line. Opp-Beckmann (1999) offers an overview of the different on-line writing activities which can bring language learners into contact with an authentic audience which may include native speakers. These include creating and sending out questionnaires and responses, letter writing and guest registries at web sites such as that of the White House, completing opinion polls which

are available on-line or creating and publishing electronic newspapers and web pages. These activities are praised as learners are seen to be more interested in engaging in the communicative activity than they are in producing grammatically correct language. The foreign language is therefore being used for a genuine purpose and not simply to gain the approval of the teacher.

Educators have begun to recognise the potential of exploiting this characteristic of the Internet even further by engaging learners in on-line learning activities which allow them to express their own beliefs and opinions and present their own personal representations of their lives and home cultures. This is related to the concept of 'agency' which Murray describes as "the satisfying power to make meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (1997: 61). The potential of the Internet to allow learners to publish their own contributions about themselves, their identities and their home cultures and then to see this being responded to by an authentic audience has been seen as one of the keys to motivating learners through the use of computers. Warschauer explains:

> "Agency is really what makes students so excited about using computers in the classroom: the computer provides them a powerful means to make their stamp on the world." (2000: n.p.)

In the author's account of a two year ethnographic study of on-line learning which he carried out in four different third-level language and writing classrooms in Hawaii, Warschauer (1999 and 2000) suggests that learners often take the opportunity of communicating and publishing on-line to explore and express their social and cultural identity. He refers to a class of Hawaiian language learners, who, through their development of web pages representing Hawaiian culture, were able to reflect on what they considered to be a true image of Hawaii and thereby try to influence the image of Hawaii which was being presented to the outside world. When the students had searched the WWW for information on Hawaii, they had found mostly tourist information about their homeland and none of this was in Hawaiian. Therefore, the students saw their web page creation activity as an important opportunity to contribute to cultural and linguistic information about Hawaii which existed on-line.

Similarly, Kramsch, A'Ness and Lam (2000) describe two case studies involving the construction of a multimedia CD ROM by learners of Spanish and the use of the

Internet for relay chat and web page creation by a Chinese learner of English. In each case the learners were seen to exploit the qualities of the new technologies to create and represent reality as they perceived it. The students creating the CD ROM on Latin American culture manipulated the positioning of texts and hyperlinks on the screen to give prominence to the aspects which the students considered to be important, while the Chinese student created a homepage about his favourite pop star in order to become a functioning part of the on-line community related to that singer. The researchers found that the Internet allowed learners to disseminate their own ideas and representations in both a fast and economic way, it offered them access to a global audience and hypermedia permitted them the ability to establish an intertextuality between texts which other media would not usually provide. The result, according to the authors, was a sense of empowerment on the behalf of the learners which they see as not being easily achieved in other learning environments:

> "Multimedia and the Internet enable learners to find a voice for themselves at the intersection of multiple time scales, to represent their own version of reality through multimodal texts, and to confront a broad public audience with that reality." (2000: 98)

The existence of an authentic audience on-line can therefore be seen as a motivating force for learners to reflect on, explore and represent aspects of their own identity and cultural background. If learners believe that their description of their home culture may influence how it is seen by others, then on-line activities such as web page creation or participation in on-line discussions can become powerful catalysts for genuine reflection on what their culture means to them and how it should be represented to the outsider. Christian, writing in reference to on-line discussion forums, explains the concept in the following way:

> "There is something compelling for students to be connected to other young people in different locations. Part of it is …a desire to explain themselves, to make a statement about who they are as they discover themselves." (1997: 63)

It is perhaps ironic that in our modern 'global village' which has been brought about by technological advances in information and communication systems, the ideas of regional and local identity have become all the more important to learners (Walravens, 1999). The more learners study, work and participate on-line, the stronger their need

becomes to have themselves and their identity represented to the world as they perceive it. I found evidence of this in my earlier research on intercultural e-mail exchanges between British and Spanish learners. In this project my Spanish students strove to differentiate their culture in Northern Spain from the stereotypical images of Spain which their e-mail partners in England had expected to find there (O'Dowd, 2003). Therefore, the challenge for the intercultural language teacher would appear to be to create on-line activities which will give students access to an authentic audience and then to make them aware of the possibilities which they have as representatives of a country to influence the way the on-line community perceives the learners' home culture. Such activities can bring students to put into words how they experience their own culture and how they differeniate it from others.

2.4.4 Collaborative Construction of Knowledge

Despite the communicative influence on language teaching methodology in recent years, many classes continue to be based on transmission models of instruction which are based principally on the teacher controlled IRF (initiation, response, feedback) format of classroom interaction. Van Lier (1996) calls for a move away from such methods of instruction and instead for educators to focus more on a type of classroom interaction which he refers to as *transformation* (1996: 180). Based on the Vygotskian belief that higher psychological functions are internalised from social interaction, *transformation* refers to educationally transforming interaction whose content is determined by the learners themselves or is produced in response to the contributions of others. This type of interaction is seen as leading to the collaborative construction of meanings and events. Much of the recent literature on on-line learning, in particular that involving the use of asynchronous discussion boards, has suggested that on-line environments are particularly suited to models of learning which aim to engage learners in such an interactive process which leads to the collaborative construction of knowledge rather than the traditional transfer of information from teacher to learner. On-line discourse which involves such dialogue can be seen as being highly suited to intercultural approaches to language learning, as it brings learners to develop an understanding of culture through interaction and collaboration with others rather than simply through the transmission of facts and figures about the target culture by their instructor.

Various reasons have been put forward as to why both synchronous and asynchronous CMC environments may support a more collaborative approach to interaction and learning than their face-to-face equivalents. Beauvois (1997) suggests that CMC does not involve turn-taking and therefore all learners can post at their own pace and teachers are not required to become greatly involved in the discussions. Furthermore, according to the author, students in synchronous computer-based discussions use "longer, more complete utterances, express less superficial ideas and communicate generally more openly about any given subject" (1997: 180). Kreeft-Peyton (1999) found that networked writing differs from traditional writing tasks as it does not only have one author when completed. Instead, CMC texts have many authors who build on and develop the contributions of others. Merron (1998) found that learners using discussion boards produced more thoughtful contributions to class discussions than they did in face-to-face environments and Chang (1998) reports that the use of on-line discussion boards encouraged learners to test their understanding of course materials by interacting with each other and asking questions. Kamhi-Stein (2000) reports the findings of a study which compared two courses, one operating over a discussion board, the other in traditional contact classes. The author claimed that while observation of face-to-face classes revealed little interaction between the learners and mostly involved traditional IRF sequences between the teacher and individual students, the on-line course showed the instructor to be playing a much reduced role and that the students were involved in creating "multiple dialogues for various purposes" (2000: 439) and their interaction featured "a high degree of peer support and collaboration" (ibid: 439). The author even found that when the teacher did post contributions to the discussion board, the comments were often ignored by the learners.

While Kamhi-Stein's report does make interesting reading, care should be taken when considering comparative studies such as this one. Pederson (1988) goes so far as to suggest that comparative studies of classes working with and without technology "forever be banned" from the area of CALL research as they "fall into the trap of attempting to attribute learning gains to the medium itself rather than the way the medium was manipulated to affect achievement" (1998: 125). In short, one should not attribute to technology what most likely belongs to the pedagogical approach of the teachers involved. This view is supported by many others, including Teles, Ashton and Roberts (2000), Murray (2000) and Warschauer (1997). Furthermore, Johnson et.al.

(2001) reported that in their on-line courses, although on-line environments did eventually contribute to the collaborative construction of knowledge, it took several months before interaction between students became common place, while Nunan concludes from his experiences with on-line tutoring that:

> "while it offers great potential for those who adhere to constructivist, student-centred and collaborative approaches to learning…there is nothing inherent in the media offered by WBI [Web-based Instruction] that takes it in this direction." (1999: 70)

A more realistic approach is perhaps to accept that many types of student-student and teacher-student interaction are possible on-line and then to look at the different types of interaction and writing which occur in on-line learning environments and to identify which are the most suited to developing collaborative learning. Christian (1997) describes a study of an on-line literature exchange between middle school students in the USA between 1993 and 1996. During this period, approximately 800 students used the 'First Class' on-line conferencing system to discuss the book 'Anne Frank's Diary' and to look at how the themes of the book reflected and related to their own lives. The author identifies the question "What does the student writing do?" as the central aspect of his study and he identifies in the collected material a taxonomy of five different types of writing, classifying them according to the effects of the on-line writing on the reader. These are:

1. The writing performs for the writer.
2. The writing reaches to an audience.
3. The writing connects with the reader.
4. The writing strives to connect with the reader in a unique and powerful way.
5. The writing 'talks'; it incorporates elements of verbal conversation. (1997: 51)

Christian stresses that these classifications do not refer to progressive levels of proficiency. Rather, they describe the extent of connectedness with the reader which the message achieves and also the form of the communication which is taking place on-line. His taxonomy moves from posts which are short, involving little risk-taking or any form of deep analysis ('performing writing') to a type of on-line writing which engages the reader with direct questions, requests elaboration on previous posts and includes cultural, regional and personal information which is not obviously related to the text

('talking writing'). This type of post, Christian maintains, will eventually lead to an on-line dialogue between the participants.

He suggests that the value of such interaction happening in an on-line environment is that students are given an opportunity to discuss their lives and their views with distant partners who will not be so quick to judge and criticise them as their normal classmates might be. Also, engaging in 'talking-writing' on-line offers students the opportunity to carefully reflect on and develop their ideas before sending their messages to their partner groups. They also have time to think about their responses when they receive them – which is not the case in normal face-to-face discussions.

A more recent contribution by Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) looked at the different types of interaction taking place on discussion boards for learners of French as a foreign language and proposed a three type framework of 'monologues', 'reflective dialogues' and 'conversations' for organising asynchronous CMC discourse. 'Monologues' are contributions which, although they may be reflective in nature, do not contain an invitation for interaction and consequently are unlikely to lead to any exchange between learners. They therefore are not considered to contribute greatly to the learning process. 'Conversations' refer to exchanges of a social nature which deal with trivial topics unrelated to the learning process. Such contributions are also not considered by the authors to be particularly beneficial to the learning process as very little meaning is being negotiated and there is no evidence of focus on form occurring. Finally, 'reflective dialogues' involve posts in which language is the topic of discussion, understanding is negotiated and social interaction is developed. Successful language learning, the authors propose, will be best achieved by 'reflective conversations', interaction which is both reflective and conversational and which is maintained over time. Learners therefore need to be able to motivate others to take part in reflective discussion through the use of explicit questioning, as well as being able to contribute themselves. The authors found a very low number of multi-student reflective conversations in their data and suggest:

> "the difficulty lies in creating the conditions for learners to be weaned away from 'monologues' and the more restricted form of the dialogic mode (answering the teacher), and gradually led towards 'fully contingent' conversational interaction which is nonetheless reflective on language learning issues." (1999: 61)

Unfortunately, the literature appears to be lacking typologies similar to those of Christian and Lamy and Goodfellow which relate to what e-mail messages should ideally contain when students engage in intercultural exchanges using this medium. What should an e-mail have or do in order to bring about reflection on one's own culture and a greater understanding of the perspectives which underlie foreign cultural behaviour? In Bahktinian terms, how can intercultural exchanges move from being mere interaction or an exchange of information between individuals to a dialogue which results in the conceptual horizon of the other being added to one's own way of seeing the world? These questions will be partly answered in section 2.4.6 and will then be more fully addressed in the first of my own studies in chapter four.

2.4.5 Working with Hypermedia

Although the standard of audio and video clips on the Internet still continues to suffer due to slow connection rates, the increased availability of broadband technology have meant that foreign language learners now have greater opportunities to access good quality multimedia-based materials on the WWW and to surf between them using hyperlinks. The combination of multimedia resources and hypertext navigation systems is known as hypermedia and is defined by Ashworth as "electronic documents that can access and link together a rich collection of resources in various media" (1996: 81). Hypermedia means that learners are no longer limited to text-based representations of the target culture; instead they can also hear audio files of native speakers, as well as seeing video clips of native speakers. Language educators have already begun making great use of authentic audio and visual materials available on-line at websites such as those of National Geographic[6] and Nova Online[7]. In some cases, such as CNN[8], the video and audio archives have been supplemented with comprehension activities especially designed for language learners (for a more in-depth overview of the use of multimedia in language learning in general see Hanson-Smith, 1999).

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[6] http://www.nationalgeographic.com

[7] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/

[8] http://literacy.org/cnnsf/archives.html

The falling cost and the increasing user-friendliness of digital technology has also allowed language learners to publish on-line hypermedia documents of themselves and their own culture and then to engage in dialogue with members of other cultures about these publications. On-line databases of multimedia materials provide learners with a location to share their video creations and then to give one another critical feedback in the incorporated discussion boards or chat rooms. This can be particularly useful for intercultural learning as the following example illustrates. Beers (2001) describes a course in which future language teachers used tools such as a digital video-camera to make short ethnographic films focussing on the significance of a particular artefact such as coffee or cars in their home culture. Following that, the students posted their videos to an on-line digital databank, entitled Webconstellations, which allowed learners to view each others' work and then post comments and reflections on each others' creations and ethnographic analysis in a discussion board. The author reported that such technology-enhanced ethnographic research helped to prepare the trainee-teachers for meeting new curricular objectives which require students to develop intercultural sensitivity rather than simply collecting factual knowledge about the target culture. Furthermore, Fischhaber (2002) examined the use of the same digital tools and suggests that their central contribution to intercultural learning is the potential to provide multiple perspectives and interpretations:

> "In den ethnographischen Projekten mit digitalen Medien im Fremdsprachenunterricht ist es aber dennoch möglich, ein Thema aus verschiedenen Perspektiven zu betrachten und somit ein umfassenderes Bild zur Meinungsbildung, eine „dichte Interpretation" zu erhalten." (2002:14)
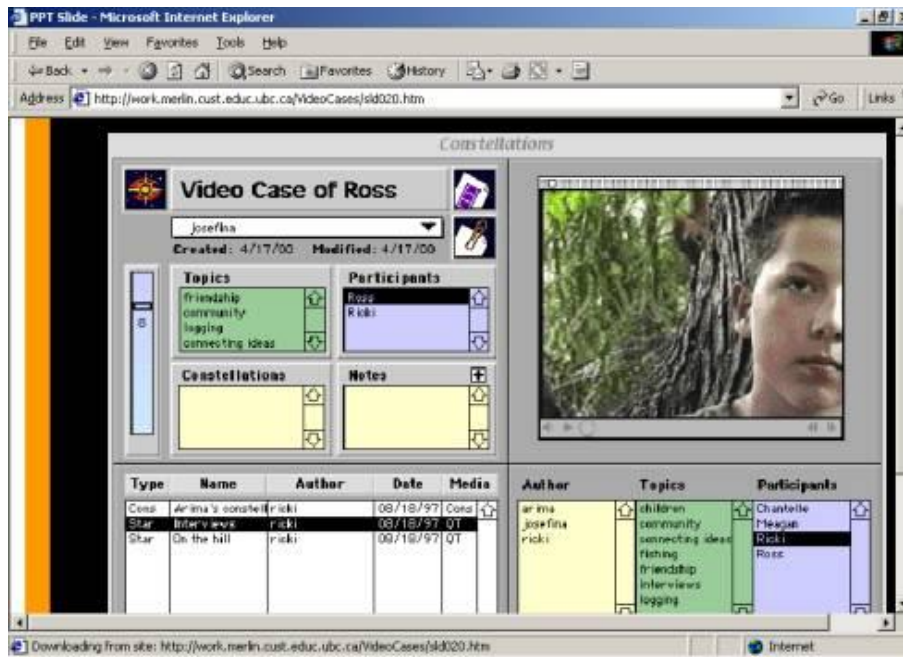
Fig. 2.7 A screen shot from the webconstellation database, including video extract and discussion forum. (Fischhaber, 2002)

The ability of hypermedia to provide video-based extracts of practices from the target culture and then to contextualise this representation with multiple interpretations has been taken up by many authors and researchers. Although many have published these culture learning products in CD ROM format, in principle these activities could also be offered on-line as well. Kramsch and Anderson (1999), for example, describe how multimedia software can be employed to highlight the importance of the sociocultural context in communication. Reporting on a CD ROM developed for learners of the Quechua language of Bolivia, the software allows the learner to view short video excerpts of the language in use in authentic communicative events in a Bolivian village. The learners' understanding of what is happening in these excerpts is then enhanced by access to a wide variety of written and spoken commentaries by the participants, ethnographers and the film maker who speak about their cultural meaning and significance. These explanations thereby provide learners with a wider 'textualisation' of the event in the foreign culture. Due to this quality, the authors see a great potential in multimedia for developing awareness in learners of the importance of the social and cultural context in language use: "Multimedia both re-enacts the original, lived context in which language was used and transforms it into readable 'discourse' or text" (1999: 39).

Fig. 2.8 A screen shot from the Quechuan CD ROM (Kramsch and Anderson, 1999)

A similar software package entitled *The Virtual Ethnographer* is described by Carel (2001). This program, designed for learners of French, focuses on gesture, gaze and other cultural aspects of interaction and attempts to heighten students' awareness of how these can have different meanings for different cultures by engaging learners in the analysis of video clips of French native speakers from the region of Brittany. The videos are combined with biographical information of the natives involved in the recordings, their own personal analyses of the communicative events and factual information on the culture of Brittany. The software is designed to be taught in conjunction with a fieldwork module which engages learners in their own ethnographic research.

Finally, the hypermedia documentary for learners of German as a foreign language, *Berliner Sehen*, contains thirteen hours of video clips of authentic conversations between natives of Berlin. The software combines the conversations with a related archive of texts, images, and historical audio and video documents and allows learners to explore the material through contextual links and from different perspectives. No set linear structure exists in the program and students select from the nine content categories in order to investigate the content. These content categories are based on notions such as 'Ich' (self), 'Andere' (others), 'Öffentliches' (public sphere) and 'Privates' (private sphere), and 'Tun und Machen' (activities; what people do in everyday life). As students are able to repeatedly reconfigure the relationships between clips and other background documents, they are encouraged to explore cultural and

social issues from different points of view through the eyes of people who live in that culture.

Fig. 2.8 A screen shot from *Berlinersehen* (1993)

The contribution of these hypermedia software packages to intercultural learning is therefore not simply to expose learners to samples of authentic interaction and language use (which may include colloquialisms, unfinished sentences and hand gestures), but also to capture and transmit (at least partly) the social and cultural contexts in which the extracts of authentic native speaker behaviour are located. Learners are not only exposed to members of the target culture interacting together, but also to information which enables them to understand the meaning of that behaviour for the people involved. Historical documents, interviews and factual data can be called up to allow learners to make connections between the micro and macro contexts and thereby to understand how and why certain meanings come to be attributed to certain behaviour.

2.4.6 Intercultural Contact

A characteristic of the Internet which is constantly referred to in the literature is its potential for bringing learners into direct contact with the target culture. Learners can not only gain access to authentic publications from the target culture on the WWW (Kerkhoff, 2001; Lee, 1998), but they can also take part in on-line chat rooms, discussion boards and newsgroups which are used by members of the target culture

(Cononelos and Oliva, 1993; Hanna and de Nooy, 2003; Kern, 1997). Furthermore, many teachers have found partner classes for their learners in the target culture with whom they can engage in more organised personal exchanges via e-mail or discussion boards. It is practically impossible to assess how many foreign language classes have become involved in such intercultural e-mail projects since the pioneering work in the late 1980s of the Orillas Network (Cummins and Sayers, 1995; Sayers, 1991) and the AT&T Learning Circles (Riel, 1997), but the "Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections" website[9] reports to have sent out over 220,000 requests from teachers for project partners since its creation in 1992, while The International Tandem Network[10] has created over 12,000 e-mail tandem partnerships. These are only two of the many websites which allow teachers and students to come together to form language learning exchanges.

However, the pedagogical outcomes of such contact have often been exaggerated or oversimplified. For example, I would not accept Brammert's claim that intercultural learning is "easily achieved through [e-mail] tandem learning" (1996: 122). Similarly, Richter (1998) is justifiably critical of Lixl-Purcell (1995) for suggesting the following:

> "As we cast our communicative nets wider, searching for contacts to foreign cultures across the globe, the spectrum of voices from otherwise obscure individuals helps us learn tolerance for difference as well as similarities." (cited in Richter, 1998: 3)

Richter rejects such claims and instead believes that the Internet "schafft zwar (medial vermittelten) Kulturkontakt, trägt damit aber nicht automatisch zu Kulturverstehen bei" (1998: 15). Kern goes a step further and suggests that in the context of on-line learning "exposure and awareness of difference seem to reinforce, rather than bridge, feelings of difference" (2000: 256). Therefore, as claims of contact automatically developing tolerance in learners cannot be taken for granted, the question arises as to what learners actually learn from on-line intercultural contact and, taking this into account, how such learning scenarios can best be structured and implemented.

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[9] http://www.iecc.org

[10] http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/

An ever-growing amount of research and practical reports exists which point towards answers to these questions. Intercultural exchanges via e-mail and other electronic media has been found to support learner autonomy (Schwienhorst, 2000: Tella; 1991), to foster language awareness (Appel, 1999), to develop learners' writing skills (Eck, Legenhausen and Wolff, 1993; Greenfield, 2003; St. John and Cash, 1995), to improve grammatical correctness (Brammerts, 1996) and to develop higher order thinking skills (Lee, 1998; von der Emde, Schneider and Kötter, 2001). However, as Kern (2000) rightly points out, to what extent intercultural on-line contact serves to develop the components of intercultural communicative competence (the central question in this study) is only beginning to receive adequate attention in the literature.

While the complexity of developing intercultural competence through on-line exchanges has been recognised for some time (Cummins and Sayers, 1995; Donath and Volkmer, 1997; Tella, 1991; Warschauer, 1997), in practice many reported e-mail exchanges continue to result in little more than superficial pen-pal projects where information is exchanged without reflection and where students are rarely challenged to reflect on their own culture or their stereotypical views of the target culture. In many reports, the mere fact that students refer in their mails to such topics as food, restaurants and holidays is considered to be 'cultural learning' and many writers assume that learners will develop intercultural competence simply by being exposed to information from the target culture (Gray and Stockwell, 1998; Leh, 1999). Researchers who have taken more rigorous approaches to the area have found many stumbling blocks on the way to developing intercultural competence in their learners. Meagher and Castaños (1996) found in their exchange between classes in the USA and Mexico that bringing the students to compare their different attitudes and values leads to a form of culture shock and a more negative attitude towards the target culture. Furthermore, Fischer (1998), in his work on German-American electronic exchanges, warns that very often students, instead of reflecting and learning from the messages of their distant partners, simply reject the foreign way of thinking, dismissing it as strange or 'typical' of that particular culture.

Kramsch and Thorne (2002) found that the reasons for on-line communication breakdown between their French and American students was due to both groups trying to engage in interaction with each other using, not merely different language styles, but

culturally different discourse genres, the existence of which both groups appeared to be unaware. While the French had approached the exchange as an academic exercise and used factual, impersonal, restrained genres of writing, the American group regarded the exchange as a very human experience which involved bonding with their distant partners and taking a personal interest in finding solutions to the problems which arose. An exchange which involved two such different approaches interacting together was bound to inevitably end in disappointment and frustration for both sides. The authors conclude that:

> "The challenge is to prepare teachers to transfer the genres of their local educational systems into global learning environments, and to prepare students to deal with global communicative practices that require far more than local communicative competence." (2002: 96)

Several recent studies have also looked at how the outcomes of intercultural exchanges can be influenced by both macro- as well as micro-level aspects of the environments in which they take place. Belz (2002), reporting on a semester long e-mail exchange between third-level German and American foreign language students, found that the context and the setting of the two partner groups had a major influence on the success and results of the exchange. Issues such as different institutional and course demands and varying levels of access to technology lead to misunderstandings with regard to deadlines for team work and therefore hindered the development of relationships on a personal level. Ironically, the author found that the American students reported that the principal intercultural learning experiences of the exchange had been increased awareness of the different institutional requirements and the different on-line behaviour of their German partners. The German group also reported having been surprised by the behaviour of their American partners:

> "From the German perspective there tended to be two salient characterisations of perceived U.S. behaviour …a) the U.S. students did not share (enough) personal information; and b) the U.S. students appeared to be more oriented toward project completion than topic discussion." (2002: 72)

Belz suggests sensitising students to such institutional and cultural differences before engaging them in exchanges – although she insists that students should not be completely protected from them. According to the author, this awareness can be

achieved by looking at theoretical textbooks on intercultural communication, as well as personal accounts on the WWW which report on the experiences of foreigners in the target culture.

Looking at the influence of institutional demands on intercultural exchanges from another perspective, Müller-Hartmann writing alone (2000a) and together with Belz (2003) suggested that institutional pressures and requirements will influence the developing relationship of teachers who organise intercultural e-mail exchange and that the teachers' ability to adapt to the extra challenges of such an exchange will influence the outcomes of the intercultural learning process for their students.

Considering these many impediments to the intercultural learning process, it becomes clear that a well-developed methodology and set of guidelines are necessary to enable educators to move from simply facilitating intercultural contact to developing intercultural competence. The first aspect which is frequently underlined in the literature is the need to incorporate intercultural exchanges fully into the curriculum as opposed to treating them as superficial pen-pal activities (Cummins and Sayers, 1995; Kern, 1997; Roberts, 1994). It is only by dedicating the necessary time and attention to the creation and analysis of the intercultural interaction will learners be able to truly learn from the contact. Secondly, writers identify the importance of the affective level in the intercultural exchanges. Müller-Hartmann (2000a, 2000b) recommends that students firstly develop a good relationship with their virtual partners in order to create an atmosphere in which different cultural meanings can be investigated and a 'change-in-perspective' can be achieved. To facilitate the development of such an open environment, the author proposes that exchanges should have adequate 'warm-up' stages involving the exchange of photos or videos, e-mails describing students hobbies and interests and perhaps even the introduction of an on-line chat between groups. Following the establishment of trust being the students, the author (2000a, 2000b, and with Richter, 2001) suggests that if learners are to achieve a genuine change in perspective in an e-mail exchange, it is necessary to engage learners in an intense negotiation of meaning with their partners. Students simply asking each other for information will not be sufficient. This is connected to the importance of the role of the teacher in the exchange process. He suggests that the teacher is necessary not only to help develop students' skills of analysis, but also to develop activities which will bring

about the negotiation of meaning and a change in perspective and thereby set learners on the road to becoming more aware of themselves as cultural beings. Richter agrees with the need for negotiation of meaning and all that this may involve:

> "Das Gelingen eines interkulturellen Dialogs erfordert vor allem ein wechselseitiges Bezugnehmen der Dialogpartner aufeinander und die Bereitschaft zur Selbstreflexion." (1998: 15)

A diagram representing the different stages of an e-mail exchange, as suggested by Müller-Hartmann and Richter (2001) can be seen below. The first stage (*establishing contact*) refers to the establishment of trust and a good personal relationship between partners. The second and third stages *(establishing dialogue* and *critical reflection*) refer to the stages when intercultural learning can best be achieved.
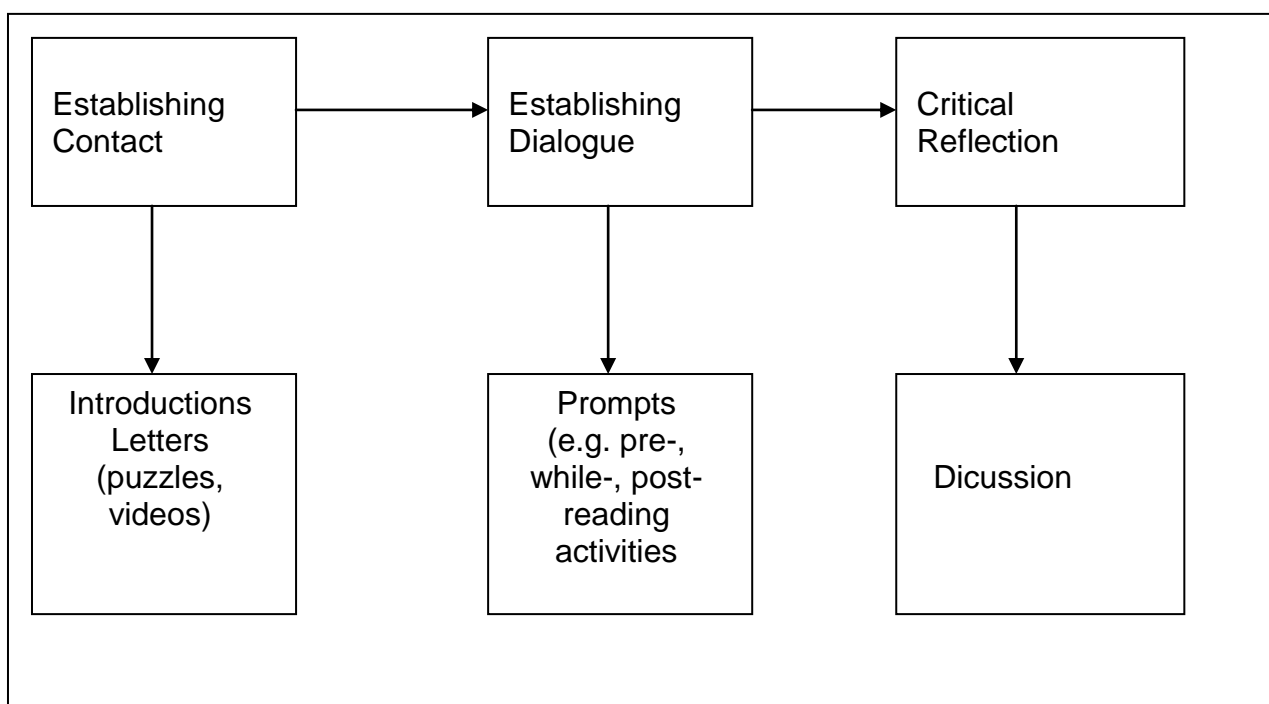
Fig. 2. 10 Phases of an e-mail project (Müller-Hartmann and Richter, 2001: 10)

The work of Fischer (1998) once again underlines the important role of the teacher in intercultural exchanges. He sees the teacher as responsible for helping students to analyse the cultural meaning of the messages they receive from their partners and also for developing questions and establishing a productive mode of enquiry in the classroom. According to the author, the ultimate aim of intercultural exchanges involves getting students to move from simply observing how foreigners behave to actually beginning to find explanations for that behaviour. To achieve this he puts forward two

main suggestions. Firstly, he highlights the need for students to be made aware of what he calls "cultural translations". By this he means: "In order to understand someone else's social reality, one most reconstitute word meanings by understanding the cultural context in which it is used" (1998: 151). He gives the example of German students writing to their partners about the act of "Kaffee trinken". He suggests that "having a coffee" does not imply the same things as its literal German translation and that students will need assistance in understanding these cultural false friends. Secondly, Fischer suggests that teachers can help students to be better prepared for participating in intercultural exchanges by training them in the techniques of ethnographic interviews:

> "elements of the ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979) such as listening very carefully to the informant as well as understanding one's own cultural background which serves as the interpretative conceptual structure for our understanding of the informant seem to be an intellectually honest approach to cultural and linguistic mediation." (1998: 83)

Finally, Warschauer's two year ethnographic study of on-line learning in Hawaii (1999 and 2000), in which e-mail exchanges played an important role, reveals some very relevant findings as to how the activity can be integrated into foreign language teaching. One of the principal findings was that the purpose of electronic literacy activities was often the key to the successful integration of the new technologies into the language classroom:

> "In short, if students understand the purpose of the activities, found them culturally and socially relevant, and were able to use the new media in appropriate ways to strive to achieve that purpose, the activities were most successful. In situations where students did not understand the purpose, found the purpose culturally or socially irrelevant, or were instructed to use the media in ways which were not appropriate for the purpose, the activities were less successful." (1999: 51)

Similarly, Warschauer also found that simply bringing about authentic communication in classes was not sufficient to guarantee purposeful use of the technologies in the eyes of learners. Instead, tasks needed to be clearly related to important learning goals – such as developing academic research skills or promoting their native language and culture – in order to be considered as worthwhile and motivating.

In summary, it has been shown that the development of intercultural learning through intercultural exchanges can be impeded by various factors, including culture shock, the attitudes of learners, the use of different discourse genres as well as clashing institutional demands. In order to make exchanges more effective, it has been recommended that they are integrated into the curriculum and that they are located within a task structure which allows for the establishment of a relationship of trust between learners and also for stages of intense negotiation of meaning. The role of the teacher is considered vital in the development of learners' skills of investigation and analysis, while the importance of having motivating and purposeful activities is also underlined.

2.4.7 Review of Findings

This section has looked at various characteristics of NBLT and has identified to what extent these characteristics may support intercultural learning. Firstly, it was seen that Internet-based learning environments allow learners to interact with each other and with members of the target culture and then to reflect on and learn from these interactions. This can give learners a better opportunity to study the content and outcomes of intercultural interaction. However, the important role of the teacher and classroom activities in the process of reflection and providing, in the case of intercultural learning, factual information about the target culture, was emphasised. Secondly, the extent to which the Internet offers a reduced social dimension and whether or not this might enhance intercultural learning was called into question. Instead, the need for participants to be open and honest about their personal and cultural backgrounds was highlighted. It was suggested that intercultural learning and a change in perspective cannot be expected to come about when the text-based nature of CMC is used to hide or disguise differences in culture, race or gender. Nevertheless, it was recognised that the feeling of anonymity which the internet can offer shy or weak learners may encourage them to participate more on-line than in more usual situations of intercultural contact.

Thirdly, it was seen that on-line web publishing projects can give learners an opportunity to reflect on their own culture by creating web-based publications representing their home culture, thereby making their own contribution to the ongoing intercultural dialogue taking place on-line. Learners, when they engage in web page

creation, are given the chance to have their own say in how their home culture is portrayed on the Internet. Fourthly, it was discussed whether on-line learning contributes to the collaborative construction of knowledge, and although such claims were seen as over-exaggerated, certain types of on-line interaction which do bring about constructive interaction were identified. These were seen as involving the negotiation of meaning and the development of dialogue and thereby being suited to intercultural learning. Fifthly, the hypermedia qualities of on-line and CD ROM materials were seen as making a powerful contribution to intercultural learning as they allow for the on-screen representation of multiple perspectives and a greater contextualisation of communicative acts. Finally, while on-line technologies were seen as facilitating intercultural contact for learners, this was not seen as sufficient to bring about intercultural learning. The careful organisation of exchanges, their integration into the classroom and the role of the teacher in developing learners' intercultural communicative skills were seen to be vital to the success of intercultural contact. An overview of these characteristics and examples of on-line intercultural learning which have exploited these characteristics are presented in table 2.1 below. The third characteristic, 'on-line interaction can facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge', has also been adapted to suit the results of the review carried out above - the characteristic is now defined as *certain types of* on-line interaction can facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge, in reference to the categories of writing which were identified as supporting intercultural dialogue.

Characteristic of NBLT supportive of intercultural approaches	Examples
It supports a combination of interaction and reflection	The Cultura Project http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/
It brings about more equal levels of participation between learners	Telecollaboration via e-mail and discussion boards
Provides an authentic environment for learners	Web page creation by learners based on their own culture
Certain Types of on-line interaction facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge	Christian's 'talking writing' and Lamy and Goodfellow's 'Reflective conversations'
It allows learners work with hypermedia products and explore multiple perspectives of behaviour	Creation: Webconstellations (http://www.merlin.ubc.ca/) Interaction: Berliner sehen (http://web.mit.edu/fll/www/projects/BerlinerSehen.html)
It facilitates intercultural contact	Intercultural telecollaboration

Table 2. 3 Intercultural Learning and NBLT

If one compares the approaches to computer-assisted culture learning which were typical in the 1980's to those which have emerged in on-line and CD ROM-based learning environments since the early 1990's, important trends and developments are evident. Although examples based on traditional, fact-based approaches to culture learning such as the activities reported by Osuna and Meskill (1998) and Lafford and Lafford (1997) are still common, there has definitely been an attempt to exploit the characteristics of the Internet and hypermedia to develop intercultural learning. Activities based on intercultural approaches have focussed on revealing to learners the meanings attributed to cultural products and practices by native speakers, as opposed to simply presenting the products and practices themselves. A good example of this is the *Cultura* project looked at earlier, which was shown to highlight the associations and values which different cultures can connect to words or behaviour. Modern approaches to computer-assisted culture learning also make the learner a much more active participant in the culture learning process. Instead of expecting the learner to passively receive facts about the target culture from the computer, intercultural approaches bring learners to create cultural products (in the form of web pages), to review those of other

learners and to draw conclusions about the foreign culture based on the multiple perspectives which they are presented with on the screen. The reports on digital databases and the *Berliner sehen* project illustrate these points clearly. Finally, as opposed to communicative activities which tended to see culture as a *fifth skill* (Kramsch, 1993) and as a background in which to locate speech act practice in the classroom, modern approaches recognise that language learning *is* culture learning, and exploit on-line exchanges with members of the target culture to make learners aware of how language and culture are related. These and some other differences between communicative and intercultural approaches to computer-assisted culture learning (CACL) can be seen in the table 2.4 below.

	Communicative CACL	**Intercultural CACL**
Definition of culture learning	Learning about the 'high culture' and behavioural aspects of the target culture	Developing ICC and intercultural awareness
Role of culture in technology-enhanced activity	Cultural input raises interest of learner and therefore contributes to the development of motivation	Makes learners aware of the different meanings attributed to cultural behaviour and how this effects intercultural communication
Role of learner	Passive receiver of factual information. In the case of interaction, the learner usually takes on role of tourist or outsider	Cultural investigator and ethnographer whose aim is to find out and understand the perspectives of members of the foreign culture
Characteristics of activities: Technological Features	Employs multimedia representations of target culture to create background for communicative tasks	Exploits hypermedia to highlight multiple interpretations of cultural behaviour
Characteristics of activities: Interaction	Uses multimedia to simulate interactions with members of the target culture	Avails of the opportunities which on-line communities offer for establishing projects of investigation with members the target culture
Characteristics of activities: Task design	Tasks involve interaction with computer or with classmate involving the practising of communicative speech acts	Tasks engage learners in collaboration with others (both in and outside of the classroom) and bring them to construct their own theories of how culture works

Table 2. 4 An overview of communicative and intercultural approaches to computer-assisted culture learning (CACL)

2.5 Electronic Literacy and Intercultural Competence

The previous section explored the possible contributions which on-line learning may make to language learning and the development of intercultural communicative competence. This final section aims to identify the particular skills and knowledge which language learners will need to exploit the Internet successfully and to become successful on-line communicators. The terminology used to refer to these skills and knowledge varies considerably in the literature. In English the terms *electronic literacy* and *computer literacy* are quite common, while Beavis uses the term *new literacy* to define "the capacity to read and write the new technologies, and to understand what is entailed in the operation, reception and production of their texts" (1998: 244). In Germany, the term *Medienkompetenz* seems to have been taken over from the area of Media Studies, which had principally focussed on the reception of television and other media before being applied to the new technologies (Moser, 2000; Schiersmann et. al., 2002). For the purposes of this study, the term *electronic literacy* will be used, as this has become more and more common in the area of CALL. Although many models of electronic literacy exist, two particular models which have been designed especially for language learners will be evaluated here, in order to identify the 'grey area' where electronic literacy and intercultural communicative competence may overlap.

There is a certain irony in the fact that while we are using the Internet to improve learners' intercultural competence, it is possibly in this very medium that learners are most going to need their foreign language and intercultural communicative skills. Crystal (2001: 218) reports research which suggests that the days of Anglo-American domination of the Internet are quickly coming to an end and that the majority of new websites being published on-line are no longer in the English language. Furthermore, the graph below (fig. 2.13), taken from the website of Global Reach[11] shows that learners surfing the Internet are likely to encounter users from a great number of different nationalities - each one bringing with it its own cultural-specific beliefs and expectations as to what is acceptable behaviour in on-line environments.

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[11] http://www.glreach.com/globstats/

**Online Language Populations
Total: 619 Million
(Sept. 2002)**

Dutch 2.0%
Russian 2.9%
Portuguese 3.0%
French 3.5%
Italian 3.8%
Korean 4.5%
German 6.7%
Spanish 7.2%
Japanese 9.7%
Chinese 10.9%
English 36.5%
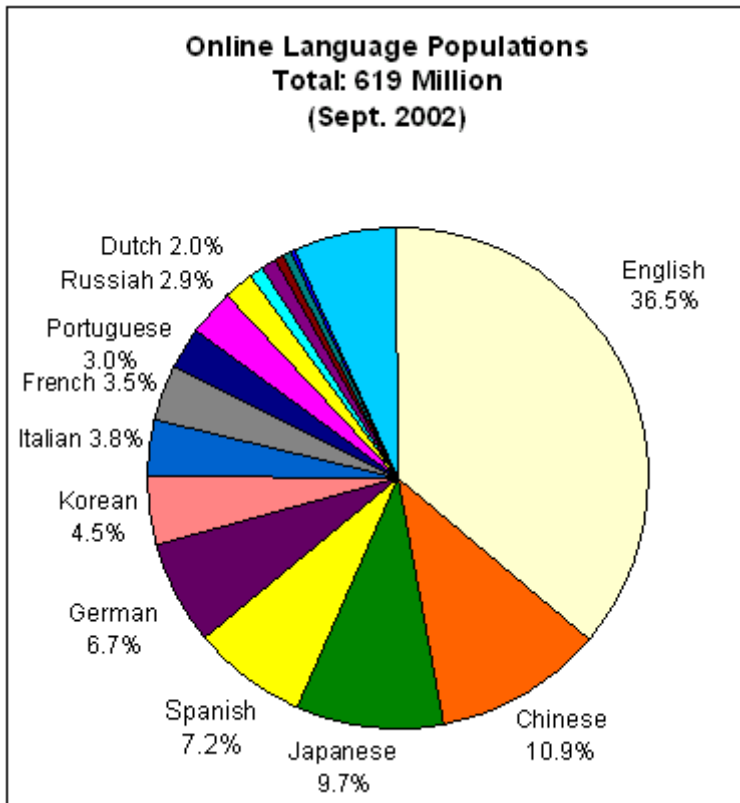
Fig. 2. 11 On-line Language Populations in 2002 (http://www.glreach.com/globstats/)

It is therefore vital that any model of electronic literacy take into account the added challenge of interacting and researching in a virtual world which is populated by members of different cultures and that these may apply meaning to the on-line publications and behaviour of the learners which is different to that which was intended. Erickson warns that:

> "there is much more apparent uniformity in human social life…But these similarities mask an underlying diversity; in a given situation of action one cannot assume that the behaviours of two individuals, physical acts with similar form, have the same meaning to the two individuals." (1986:126)

While an understanding of this forms part of intercultural competence, if learners working on-line, it also becomes a necessary part of their electronic literacy. But in what ways are the challenges of intercultural communication being dealt with?

In response to the challenges of intercultural communication on the Internet writers have proposed various solutions. In their e-book on on-line tutoring, Labour et. al. (2000) recommend the use of an on-line 'intercultural' writing style which will be

understandable to non-native speakers of English. This involves short, simple sentences, active modes of verbs, explicitly defined vocabulary and the frequent use of tags and questions. However, such an approach only scratches the surface in regard to dealing with the challenges of on-line intercultural communication. No matter how simple and 'clear' an on-line text may be, it may still communicate a different meaning or significance depending on the cultural background of the reader. Kim and Bonk (2002) suggest that learners be prepared for cultural differences in on-line communication practices by being given examples or case transcripts beforehand which highlight such cultural variation. They propose that these examples could even be integrated into an on-line help system or web site. Furthermore, they suggest that on-line instructors should require students to include social information in their messages in order to support students from high context cultures where relationship building is often given priority over task completion (e.g. countries such as Korea and Japan).

Two detailed models which locate electronic literacy within foreign language learning scenarios can be found in the work of Mosler (2000) and Shetzer and Warschauer (2000). Both appreciate that the demands of modern society require learners to be capable of operating successfully on-line and both highlight foreign language skills (especially the ability to use English) as an integral part of this electronic literacy. Shetzer and Warschauer point out that whereas in the past teachers used new technologies to learn foreign languages, the current situation now requires educators to teach languages in order to make learners effective users of technology. But how does each model take into account the cultural element of on-line communication?

The Shetzer and Warschauer model (2000: 177-178; reprinted below) is divided into three overlapping areas: communication, construction and research. Although the authors do not raise the question of intercultural communicative competence, each section contains skills which can be seen to have intercultural elements. In the communication section, for example, the skills of contacting and communicating with individuals and groups (skills 1.1 and 1.2) will require intercultural competence on the part of the learner for various reasons. Learners will need to be aware of the appropriate register and formality in the on-line writing styles of different cultures and they will also have to consider issues such as privacy and politeness. However, being aware of such differences in on-line communication is not sufficient; learners must also be able to

negotiate a style which is in some way acceptable to themselves and their on-line communication partners. One of the aspects of Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence is the ability to "identify similar and dissimilar processes of interaction, verbal and non-verbal, and negotiate an appropriate use of them in specific circumstances" (1997a: 64). Such an objective is what is missing from this subsection of electronic literacy. These skills are also relevant in reference to the skills of participating in collaborative projects and understanding netiquette issues (skills 1.3 and 1.6).

A failing of Shetzer and Warschauer's model would therefore appear to be that its assumption that on-line communication has its own particular style of communication and therefore there is only *one style* which needs to be mastered by learners. Of course, to a certain extent, on-line communication does have features which make it different from other forms of communication and the authors rightly state that "those who master the particular stylistic and sociolinguistic features required by the context and medium will best reach their audience" (2000: 173). However, they go on to refer to the claim that CMC "reduces social context clues related to race, gender, handicap, accent, and status…"(ibid.). CMC appears to be treated by the authors as its own cultural and social context. But, of course, as has been seen earlier (see sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.6) recent research has called this belief into question. In particular, the work of Herring (1996), Kramsch and Thorn (2002), Murray (2000), Roche (2001) and Belz (2001) clearly demonstrate that people bring to the Internet their own cultural assumptions about how communication should be organised and what meanings should be applied to language. Therefore, it is not sufficient to suggest that learners need to know, for example, how to "participate in collaborative projects with people in different places to accomplish a shared goal" (2000:175). Instead, it is necessary to teach learners how to participate in collaborative projects *taking into account the cultural backgrounds of the project members*. The problem is not merely that the project members are not in the same place. Instead, the problem is that firstly, they are in different places and secondly, that they may come from different cultural backgrounds and will therefore have different expectations as how projects should be carried out, at what rate they are completed and how roles should be organised. Electronic literacy must include an understanding of these cultural differences.

The second area covered in Shetzer and Warschauers' model is construction of web sites. The cultural aspects of web page design has already been covered to a great extent by publications such as Yunker's (2002) "Beyond Borders: Web Globalisation Strategies". However, these have focussed principally on how cultural faux-pas are committed on the homepages of international business companies and point out common mistakes such as creating forms that fail to take into account differing standards in phone numbers or the many ways dates and times are expressed around the world. I would suggest that more important aspects of intercultural communicative competence also form a part of this aspect of electronic literacy. If learners are creating web pages which are going to be viewed by an international audience, it is necessary to pay special attention to the content of that on-line material – an aspect which is not referred to in this model of electronic literacy. While the use of hypertext (2.1), the suitable choice of web technologies (2.4) and the maintenance of the websites (2.2) are all valuable skills, they should not be attributed more importance than the learners' ability to create content which will stimulate and bring about interaction with members of different cultures. Shetzer and Warschauer do touch on this idea when they suggest that learners' websites should "encourage communication about topics presented in Web sites" (2000: 178), however I would suggest that this does not go far enough and deserves more attention from the authors.

Finally, in the area of research, it is hard to imagine how most of the skills mentioned in this section could be developed in language learners without a great deal of knowledge about the target culture and training in the skills of intercultural competence. In order for language learners to carry out research about the target culture on-line, the skills of categorising and subcategorising information (3.1), evaluating the value of information (3.3), determining authority and expertise (3.4), identifying rhetorical techniques of persuasion (3.5) and understanding privacy and quality issues (3.9) all must be complemented by factual knowledge about the target culture (Byram, 1997a: 58-60) in order for them to be useful. Different cultures are likely to organise, present and communicate information on their websites in different ways, in the same way that they will have different approaches to academic essays, business letters or curriculum vitas. Signals of authority and expertise in the content of German websites may be quite different to those in their Spanish equivalents, and the techniques of rhetoric used by on-line writers of English may be very different to those of the French.

Learners need to be aware of this when carrying out research on the WWW and they also need the relevant cultural knowledge to put these research skills into use. Therefore, I would suggest it would be more accurate to define these skills in a language or culture specific way, for example, 'determining authority and expertise *in German websites'* or 'identifying rhetorical techniques of persuasion *common to English websites'*.

In summary, although Shetzer and Warschauers' model is an excellent practical overview for language teachers of the skills which language learners need in order to function on-line successfully, it stands to be improved by paying greater attention to the cultural aspects of engaging learners in on-line work and study. The vast amount of material on the Internet is not acultural and people do not interact on-line in one common 'virtual' communicative style. Therefore, when learners communicate on-line, they must take into account the varying interactive styles of different cultures and languages. Secondly, when learners construct web pages, they must consider how these publications will be received and interpreted by a multicultural audience and they must consider whether the topics and content of their publications will encourage interaction with people from the target culture, thereby giving learners the chance to use their foreign language. Finally, when learners carry out research on-line, they must have the knowledge about the target culture necessary in order to be able to interpret on-line publications from that culture.

Framework of Electronic Literacy (Shetzer and Warschauer, 2000: 176-178)

Communication

1.1 How to contact individuals to ask a question, give an opinion, give advice, share knowledge, and survey (i.e. how to function as a change agent who initiates contact). How to be contacted to receive an answer to a question, receive feedback, receive advice or some other communication (i.e. how to function as the recipient of contact).

1.2 How to contact groups of people using a variety of online technologies in order to read for comprehension, ask a question, share an opinion, give advice, share knowledge, conduct surveys, and post summaries and original research. How to be contacted and interact with groups of people.

1.3 How to participate in collaborative projects with people in different places to accomplish a shared goal. (i.e. how to set up and participate in communication networks).

1.4 How to select the available asynchronous technologies such as e-mail, e-mail lists, Web bulletin boards, newsgroups, etc.

1.5 How to select the synchronous technologies such as MOOs, chat rooms, IRC, person to person and group videoconferencing via CU-See Me, Internet Phones, etc.

1.6 Understanding implications: Netiquette issues, privacy issues, safety issues, corporate advertising issues

Construction

2.1 How to create Web pages and Web sites, individually and collaboratively, through effective combination of texts and other media in hypertext format.

2.2 How to store, maintain, and manage Web sites so they can be viewed locally and globally.

2.3 How to market Web sites, and encourage communication about topics presented in Web sites.

2.4 How to select the available Web technologies: HTML, Web page creation software programs, Web page storage options.

2.5 Understanding implications: Copyright issues, intellectual property issues, corporate advertising issues, safety issues and censorship issues.

Research

3.1 How to come up with questions to investigate, how to develop keywords, how to categorize and subcategorise, how to map ideas and concepts (non-linear idea development).

3.2 How to find information online using Web indices, search engines, and other specialized search tools.

3.3 How to evaluate and analyse the value of information and tools.

3.4 How to determine authority and expertise.

3.5 How to identify rhetorical techniques of persuasion.

3.6 How to distinguish primary and secondary sources.

3.7 How to cite online sources and give credit to others.

3.8 How to select the available search technologies: search indices and engines, software packages for brainstorming etc.

3.9 Understanding implications: Corporate advertising issues, authority issues, privacy issues, quality issues, theft/crime issues.

Like the previous framework, Moser's model of Medienkompetenz applied to on-line technologies is intended as a guideline for teachers who wish to organise and maximise their learners' use of on-line resources. Although both sets of authors coincide in certain aspects of what learners need to be able to do and to know on-line, Moser differs from Shetzer and Warschauer in the areas to which he pays particular emphasis. For example, homepage development is only seen as one sub point of technical competence in this model (1.4), while it is a full section of Shetzer and Warschauers' model. On the other hand, critical reflection on the social and political issues which lie behind Internet use in society is considered a complete subsection in

itself in Moser's model (subsection 4), while it does not receive a mention by the other writers.

Interestingly, Moser, in his subsection on cultural competence (subsection 2), goes a good way to addressing the failing in the electronic literacy model which was pointed out above. Here, he refers to the need for learners to be able to deal with the 'multikulturellen Charakter des Netzes' and to understand the "kulturellen Codes und Präsentationen im World Wide Web" (2000: 251). Such an awareness of the intercultural nature of on-line work is exactly what is missing from the previous model. However, whether it is strictly true to say that the Internet is heavily influenced by a US American-based informal interaction style (2.3) is perhaps as questionable as claiming that the Internet hides aspects of race and gender. I would argue that on-line academic publications, newspaper articles or many other aspects of on-line language are no more likely to be in an informal style than their 'hardcopy' equivalents. Murray explains that when using the Internet "people use linguistic modes and features appropriate to their particular context" (2000: 341) and that the medium is only one part of that context. This means, for example, that business colleagues who do not know each other well or who have different hierarchical positions in a company are not going to write to each other using slang or in an informal way simply because they are using on-line technologies. An informal style may be common on Internet chat rooms and message boards, but this is no reason for learners to be encouraged to use such a register any time they engage in interaction with others via e-mail or in other on-line contexts.

On-line Medienkompetenz (Moser, 2000: 251-252)

Technische Kompetenzen

1.1 Navigieren in Hypertextstrukturen und mit Hilfe von Suchmaschinen

1.2 Fachausdrücke der Netzkommunikation (Internet Relay Chat, HTML, Browser u.s.w.) anwenden,

1.3 Umgehen mit E-mail, Mailing Listen und News-Groups,

1.4 evtl. Entwicklung einer Homepage.

Kulturelle Kompetenzen

2.1 Orientieren im Datenstrom und gezieltes Recherchieren

2.2 Einsozialisieren in die Konventionen und Regeln der Netzkommunikation und der   Netiquette,

2.3 Umgang mit dem multikulturellen Charakter des Netzes und seiner stark durch us-amerikanische Formen geprägten (lockeren) Verhaltensweisen,

2.4 Dechiffrieren der kulturellen Codes und Präsentationen im World Wide Web.

Soziale Kompetenzen

3.1 Aufnahme von Beziehungen über E-mail, News-Groups und Mailing-Listen

3.2 Sensibilität für die spezifische Parameter einer Kommunikation, die über die Anonymität des Netzes erfolgt

3.3 Teilnahme an Aktivitäten des Online-Lernens

3.4 Partizipation an sozialen Netzaktivitäten wie MUDs oder Live-Diskussionen in Chatrooms.

Reflexive Kompetenzen

4.1 Erstellen einer Bilanz von Nutzen und Kosten der persönlichen Netzaktivitäten,

4.2 Auseinandersetzung mit Positionen einer Netzkritik,

4.3 die Beschäftigung mit Fragen der Zukunft des Internet

In summary, both of these models provide teachers will practical guidelines as to what their learners need to be able to do and to know when engaging in on-line learning. However, it was seen that only Moser's model appears to have sufficiently taken into account the cultural aspects of on-line environments. On-line behaviour is not independent of cultural influences and therefore any interpretation of electronic literacy must take intercultural communicative competence into account. The research presented later on in this study will further expand on what intercultural communicative competence means in on-line contexts.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to answer two questions which are central to this study. Firstly, I explored how on-line technologies can support the development of intercultural competence in language learners. Secondly, I attempted to identify the intercultural aspects of the electronic literacies which learners will require when engaged in on-line activities.

Despite the fact that the Internet is still commonly used to engage learners in activities which are reminiscent of more traditional approaches to culture learning, it was seen that on-line technologies can indeed support intercultural communicative competence in many different ways. Five different characteristics of on-line learning were identified which, when exploited appropriately, can help to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for intercultural competence. For example, web-based activities, such as *Cultura* and *Berliner Sehen*, were seen to provide learners with greater access to native speakers' perspectives on cultural behaviour, while well-structured telecollaborative exchanges were seen to engage learners in dialogic interaction with native speakers from the target culture. Other examples of good practice, such as web page creation or work with on-line digital databases, give learners opportunities to explore and reflect on their own cultural identity as they go about presenting their home culture to the world.

Having established how the Internet can sustain intercultural learning, two models of electronic literacy were examined in order to identify what language learners need to do and to know in order to learn successfully on-line. It was seen that, while frameworks of electronic literacy for language learners do exist, not all of them take into account the intercultural aspects of on-line learning and communication. It was suggested that, as in any medium, on-line behaviour is influenced by cultural factors and that this must be taken into account by any model of electronic literacy.

The research in the following chapters takes up issues and questions which have come up in this study until now. For example, it was suggested in 2.3.4 that the literature is lacking typologies which suggest what on-line interaction should ideally contain in order for students to engage in successful intercultural dialogue with their distant partners. This will be examined at stages throughout all three of the studies.

Research which identifies to what extent aspects of Byram's model of intercultural competence can be developed by on-line intercultural exchange will also be looked at in the first study. The second piece of research will examine an on-line course which borrowed from the examples of good practice identified in this chapter in order to put the principles of modern Cultural Studies into practice. The final piece of research will look at the effectiveness of e-mail and videoconferencing for introducing learners to the principles of ethnographic interviewing. However, first of all, the following short chapter will describe the research techniques used in these studies.

3. Research Questions and Research Methodology

"The qualitative researcher's aim is to understand the event from the perspective of the participants, to uncover the qualities which contribute to reconstructing its meaning and significance." (*Beers, 2001: np*)

3.1 Introduction

In the first chapter of this thesis I identified Byram's model of ICC as a comprehensive and practical model for integrating culture learning into the foreign language classroom. Following that, I carried out a review of how CALL, and in particular NBLT, has been used until now to explore the culture component of language learning. I suggested that, until recently, CALL and NBLT research had paid limited attention to the development of ICC through international on-line networks and other on-line tools. In this second part of the thesis, I will report on three pieces of research related to this area which I carried out over a two-year period at the University of Essen in Germany. First of all, in this short chapter I will outline the precise research questions which will be investigated in the case studies and I will explain why I see these questions as being relevant. Following that, I will describe the research methods which are used in the study. I will argue that qualitative methodology is generally most suited to this area as it permits the researcher to capture a richer, more complete understanding of the many factors which influence how telecollaboration contributes to the development of language learners' ICC.

3.2 Arriving at the Research Questions

As is probably true for most cases, the research questions at the core of this thesis are the result of three years of previous work in the area of on-line intercultural exchanges. During my time working at university level in Northern Spain, I had begun to study the effects which videoconferencing and e-mail exchanges with classes in the USA and Britain had on the Spanish students' understanding of the target cultures (O'Dowd, 2001 and 2003). Although students reported an overall satisfaction with the activity, I became aware they students were often leaving the exchanges with more reinforced stereotypes and negative attitudes about the target culture instead of becoming more tolerant and culturally aware. In my research of a year-long e-mail exchange between five sets of Spanish and British students I attempted to identify certain characteristics of the content of the partners' e-mails which would contribute to successful intercultural learning (2003). I found that students needed to have opportunities in their correspondence to express their own feelings and views of the home culture, they required insightful questions from their partners in order to reflect critically on their own culture, and finally, they had to engage in dialogic interaction with their partners about issues in the home and target cultures (2003:137).

However, these findings only led me to ask more questions about intercultural learning on-line. Were intercultural exchanges maybe more useful in developing some aspects of ICC than others? For example, what kind of 'knowledge' about the target culture were students being exposed to in their partners' correspondence? And simply because students were receiving data from the target culture, did this mean they were also developing the intercultural skills to analyse and interpret it? Therefore, instead of simply identifying what qualities of the relationships between partners were contributing to intercultural learning, I also became interested in finding out what should occur in the classroom in order to exploit the intercultural contact to the maximum. In other words, instead of marching students blindly into the unknown territory of virtual intercultural contact and expecting them to learn as they go along, I wanted to find out how teachers could prepare students for the task of become successful intercultural learners. Here the role of the teacher and of task structure would obviously become as important as the type of relationship which students had with their partners.

As a result of this process, the following question emerged as the centre of this research: In what ways can Network-Based Language Teaching, and in particular telecollaboration, contribute to the development of learners' ICC? Of course, within this question, many related questions were also seen to be relevant. Firstly, what should the role of the teacher be in order to support intercultural learning in the networked classroom? Secondly, do different communication tools support the development of ICC in different ways? Thirdly, are there particular characteristics in on-line intercultural relationships between learners which particularly support the development of intercultural understanding? As was mentioned earlier I had begun looking at this final question in previous research. It was also seen by Fischer (1998: 191) as being particularly relevant for future research studies in this area.

It is clear that these research questions have a focus which is both practical and change-oriented. The questions essentially aim to establish what a pedagogical practice (NBLT) can contribute to intercultural learning and then go on to find how this pedagogical practice can be used most efficiently. In this sense, I reflect the beliefs of Ortega who states the following about computer-assisted classroom discussion (CACD):

> "CACD studies need to document and monitor not only processes and outcomes during the CACD sessions, but also other aspects of classroom learning (e.g., teaching style, degree of integration of CACD tasks into the syllabus, etc.) that seem to affect the ways in which learners interpret and perform CACD tasks." (1994: 687)

3.3 Research Methodology

As I was establishing the question for the study, I also engaged in the process of identifying the research approach which would best suit my needs. In the words of Larsen-Freeman and Lang, I believed it was important to be "clear about what the purposes of the study is and to match that purpose with the attributes most likely to accomplish it" (1991: 14). The approach which I adopted was essentially qualitative, combining the principles of action research with elements of ethnography. I believed that such an approach would permit me to identify the many aspects of the context which could influence the success of telecollaborative projects. Although still underrepresented in the major research journals of Applied Linguistics, qualitative research is generally considered to have risen in stature in recent years (Lazarton, 1995 and 2003; Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-v. Ditfurth, 2001; van Lier, 1988) and to be particularly suited to studying the impact of new technologies in the language classroom (Belz, 2002; Warschauer, 1999; Warschauer and Kern, 2000). A comprehensive definition of qualitative research is proposed by Denzin and Lincoln:

> "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them….qualitative researchers display a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand. It is understood however that each practice makes the world visible in a different way. Hence there is frequently a commitment to using more than one interpretive practice in any study." (2000: 3-4)

Ethnography is one of the most common qualitative methods being used in the area of applied linguistics and the definition above reflects two of ethnography's main principles. First of all, ethnography aims to identify "the meaning people bring to" phenomena. In other words, the focus is on understanding the *emic* perspective or how the students and teachers in question understand and experience what is happening in the classroom. Quantitative research, on the other hand, will attempt to impose the researcher's perspective, analysing data according to *etic* or "researcher-determined categorisation schemes" (Davis, 1995: 433). Creating a detailed description of behaviour which focuses on the *emic* or insider's perspective is usually known as *thick description* (Geertz, 1973). Secondly, the authors stress that it is necessary to use various methods of interpretation ("more than one interpretive practice") in order to

achieve as complete and in-depth a picture of the area under investigation as possible. This use of several different sources of data to confirm or deny theories is commonly referred to as the triangulation of data (Müller-Hartmann, 2001).

Apart from triangulation and the creation of thick descriptions, according to Lazarton (2003), the other main characteristics of ethnographic research are prolonged engagement and grounded theory. Prolonged engagement means that the ethnographers spend a significant time among their subjects in order to develop a good understanding of their culture. Grounded theory refers to allowing for theory and categories to emerge from the data as opposed to trying to make the data fit pre-existing theory. Dick (2000) explains the difference between grounded theory and traditional research methodology in the following way:

> "What most differentiates grounded theory from much other research is that it is explicitly emergent. It does not test a hypothesis. It sets out to find what theory accounts for the research situation as it is. In this respect it is like action research: the aim is to understand the research situation. The aim…is to discover the theory implicit in the data." (Dick, 2000: 4)

In the process of my research I attempted to take into account all four of these key characteristics. In each of the three pieces of research, prolonged engagement could only extend to one university semester as each class only remained together for that length of time. However, during that period, I made an effort to meet and interact with the students for more than just class time. Regular interviews face-to-face and by e-mail and occasional informal chats in the hall-way and in the cafeteria often allowed me to gain insights into how the students were experiencing the intercultural projects. (For example, a chance encounter and a brief chat with one student in the corridor during the second project revealed to me the important function of social bonding which our webpage-creation projects had in our classes.) Through the analysis of these interviews, e-mails, class transcripts, students' essays and questionnaires, I was able to identify the issues emerging which were important for the students (i.e. the *emic* perspective), as opposed to those which I, teacher and researcher, might have considered influential in the exchange's level of success. As the term proceeded, I collected and categorised e-mails and other data and began developing ideas about which factors were influencing the outcome of the exchanges (i.e. grounded theory). In order to confirm or deny these ideas, I regularly triangulated the various sources of data with each other. (e.g. Did the

interviews and class transcripts reveal the same issues which I was identifying in their on-line correspondence?).

As mentioned at the start of this sub-section, the research methodology was also influenced by the principles of action research as well as by ethnography. Wallace (1998) defines action research for teachers as: "collecting data on your everyday practice and analysing it in order to come to some decisions about what your future practice should be" (1998: 4). As such, action research reflected my aim of analysing the effectiveness of the on-line culture learning activities in my own classes and then making proposals about how these activities could be adapted and improved. However, while the research was originally focussed on my own situation, I was aware of Stenhouse's warning that action research should also contribute to "a theory of education and teaching which is accessible to other teachers" (cited in Cohen and Manion, 1994: 186).

Action research can therefore be seen as a cyclical process which aims to change and improve the state of affairs in the classroom (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Nunan (1992) suggests that the process begins by teachers identifying a problem or question related to their classes. They then collect some initial data relating to the problem and then engage in certain action in order to find a solution. Further data is then collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the action taken. The results of this research is then disseminated and the cycle begins again in the on-going process of finding a more appropriate solution to the problem under investigation. The cyclical nature of action research is clearly illustrated below in fig. 3.1.
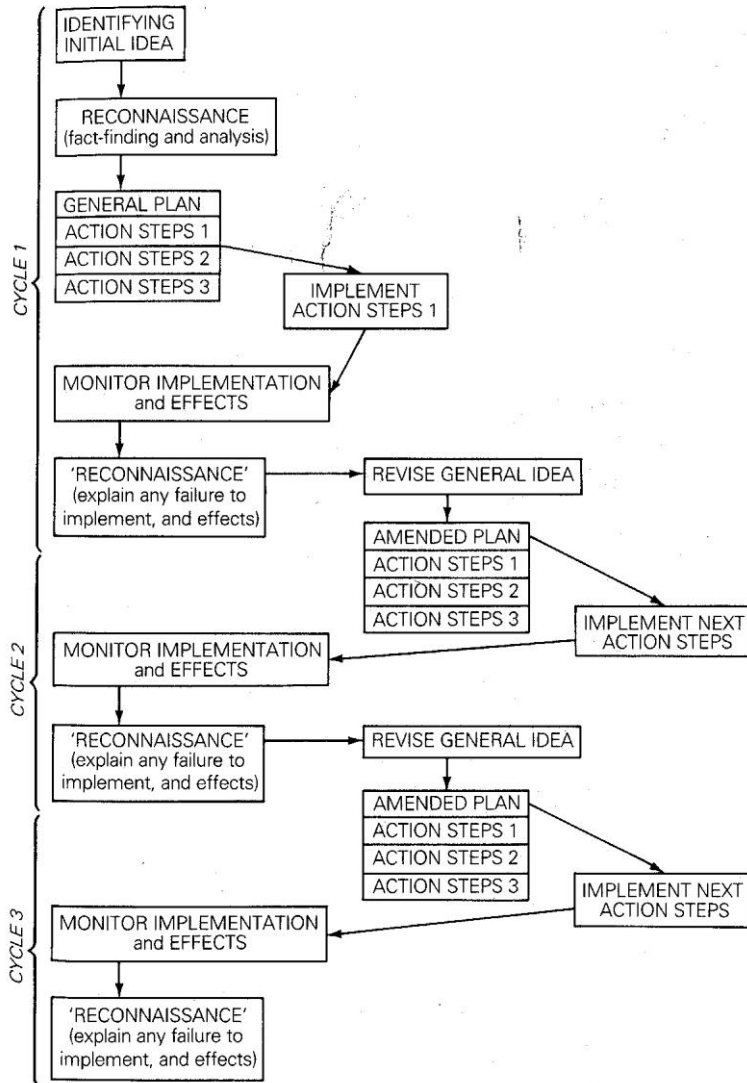
Fig. 3.1 Elliot's Action research model (1991: 71)

In this particular study, the cyclical nature of action research most clearly shows itself in the refinement of research questions and methodology which took place from one study to the next. The issues and problems related to intercultural learning which arose in the first study led me to adapt the aims of the course reported in the second as well as the focus of activities and class content. Similarly, the research findings in the exchange between Essen and Dublin (chapter five) also led to other issues arising which I attempted to address in the third and final exchange. For this reason, while the overall research question remained constant for the length of the three classes, more specific 'sub-questions' were taken up and dealt with as they emerged.

3.4 Data Collection

The qualitative data collection techniques which were employed in this study included the following:

Participant Observation: In the three studies I played the role of both teacher and classroom researcher. By taking on both roles I hoped to play an integrated role in the community of learning and to experience the benefits and drawbacks of on-line intercultural language learning first hand. My role of course teacher also allowed me to build up a relationship of trust and familiarity with the students which an outside researcher may not have achieved. In relation to this point, another teacher/researcher has the following to say:

> "My daily interaction with the students in negotiating meanings through English and participating in the students' successes and failures, with the attendant need to revise my own teaching strategy, provide a vantage point to their perspectives. Moreover, I enjoyed natural access to the daily exercises and notes of the students and the record of their attendance without having to foreground my role as researcher." (Canagarajah, 1993: 606)

Other researchers of second language learners have also carried out successful qualitative studies of the classes they are teaching (Belz, 2002; Belz and Kinginger, 2002; and partly, Warschauer, 1999), however Chapelle, Jamieson and Yuhsoon (1996) point out that the technique also has several limitations. They warn that data gained from participative observation can be both subjective and anecdotal in nature. Furthermore, teacher/researchers may often find their attention divided between observing and teaching and therefore miss out on important pieces of data. I was aware of these dangers in my combined role as both teacher and researcher in this research and I therefore exploited various techniques indicated in the literature (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in order to avoid them as much as was possible. First of all, to avoid engaging in biased interpretations of the data, I carried out member checks. This involved checking my interpretation of the data with that of the actual students from which the data had been collected. I also engaged in regular debriefing sessions with my research group at the University of Essen in order to hear alternative interpretations of the data. In order not to miss important data I recorded many classes and I also kept a reflexive journal

nearby to note down developments and ideas as they happened. These different techniques will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

Exchange content: During the three case studies reported here, students engaged in exchanges with distant partners in the USA and in Ireland via various combinations of e-mail, on-line message boards and videoconferences. In as much as was possible, I collected in digital format the content of all the students' interactions in these media. In the case of contact via e-mail in the first and third classes, German students were required to submit to me in digital form copies of all messages they sent and received in relation to the projects. The message board content in the first and second exchange was downloaded and printed out for analysis, while transcripts were made of the interaction between students in our three videoconference sessions in the final project. The many mails which I exchanged with my partner-teachers in the USA and Ireland were also collected and were used to study how we as teachers had negotiated the development of the exchange and how our different attitudes to intercultural exchanges may have influenced the outcome of the projects.

Questionnaires: In all three projects, the German groups were asked to fill out questionnaires at the beginning, half-way and final stages of their exchanges. This enabled me to identify changing reactions to the virtual contact. My partner teachers often allowed me to send their students questionnaires at various stages, however the return rate in most cases was quite low. This may have been due to a lack of emphasis being attributed to the questionnaires by the partner teachers or perhaps it was due to the students having different timetable pressures to our own in Germany. In general, the questionnaires involved a mix of open and semi-open questions. Similar questionnaires had already been used with success to evaluate on-line intercultural exchanges in other studies (see, for example, Eck, Legenhausen and Wolff, 1994). Sometimes quantitative and qualitative measures were combined in the questionnaires. Students were asked to say how much they agreed with certain statements (using five point Likert scales) and then they were requested to expand on their response by writing examples or specific details.

Interviews: During the course of the exchanges I regularly asked students to come to my office and carry out interviews about their experiences. These interviews were

recorded and later transcribed. During the interviews, I usually had a print-out of the particular student's on-line interaction and many of the questions were based on sections of their correspondence. While most students were chosen for interview on a random basis, others were specifically chosen when they appeared to be having a particular problem or a phase of particularly rich interaction with their partner. By asking students to comment on their on-line interaction I was able to take into consideration their interpretation of events instead of imposing my own analysis on the material. The fact that students could also be interviewed by e-mail enabled me to react quicker to issues as they emerged. Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) consider action research to be particularly suited for researching aspects of network-based language learning as electronic networks can greatly facilitate collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge between the teacher/researcher and the learners themselves.

Class transcripts: Sections of the classes in Germany which were specifically related to the exchange were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Writers such as Müller-Hartmann (2001) and van Lier (1988) stress the value of interaction analysis and class transcripts in qualitative research, however I would tend to agree with Glaser (1998) who warns that recording and transcribing are activities which can often take up more time than they are worth and that basic note-taking based on recordings is often sufficient.

Essays: In Germany students were often given writing tasks which were either based on their cross-cultural interactions or which had to be sent to their partners as supplements to their e-mails. These essays proved to be a particularly rich source of information on what students were learning from their interactions as well as what they felt was important to transmit to their partners about their home culture. The idea of combining other written texts with the e-mails is based on a suggestion by Kern (1997) who found that the nature of e-mails means that they are often too short to provide sufficient cultural information for the distant partners.

Researcher's Reflexive Journal: Following each class, and also at regular stages during the study and evaluation of the other data, I made entries into a reflexive diary regarding my thoughts on the exchange and the intercultural learning which, I felt, was or was not taking place at that stage. If I received any feedback from students or the

partner class in any form this was also noted in the journal. Very often, I printed out e-mails and pasted them into the journal near other information which I felt was related to the same category or theme. This helped with the categorisation of different data. By noting down my theories and ideas in the journal I was able to return to these at a later date and reflect on their validity and, in many cases, fine tune them in the light of new research material.

Peer-group feedback: The belief that action research should involve collaboration between various teachers, colleagues and/or researchers is held by many writers (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Wallace, 1998), however Nunan argues that teachers should be able to carry out research in their own classes even if they are unable or unwilling to collaborate with others in the research process (1992: 18). In the case of telecollaboration, I would suggest that a good working relationship between the teachers in both classes is vital and the researcher should consult with their distant partner on a regular basis in order to be aware of how developments in the exchange are being experienced in the other classroom. Throughout these exchanges I was in regular contact with the other teachers. Our mails often involved reporting on how are students were reacting to the exchange and what they were learning from it. Very often I contacted the other teacher in order to 'try out' theories which I was developing based on the data. Of course, teachers are busy people and, unless the research is being carried out by both sides, teacher/researchers should not expect their partners to be willing to dedicate much time to the analysis of data. The exchanges' progress was also discussed with members of my research group at the University of Essen. Discussing the emerging issues with colleagues and fellow PhD candidates allowed me to get an "outsider's perspective" on my theories and findings. In a sense, discussing the content of the exchanges with the partner teachers and my research group was a form of what Denzin describes as "investigator triangulation" (1970: 472) in which more than one researcher offers an interpretation of the data in order to avoided biased conclusions being made.

Social Data: Finally, a study which wishes to take into account how the social and cultural contexts in which the telecollaboration is located can influence the outcomes of on-line intercultural learning should refer to statistical data and 'background information' about the learners' home cultures (Belz, 2002). Davis suggests that when carrying out qualitative research, researchers should take into account data which is "at

least one level up from the actual social situation being investigated…studies also often demand going beyond one level up to include the contextual influences of, say, the school, the community, the school district, and even larger historical and socio-political factors" (1995: 444). In these case studies, I used statistical data on the use of computers and the Internet in Germany, Ireland and the USA, the levels of access to on-line computers in the students' campuses, and recent publications on social change in the three countries in order to better contextualise the attitudes and behaviour of students and teachers.

Of course, when researching whether a particular learning activity is contributing to learners' intercultural competence, certain issues arise which need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, how reliable is any evidence which suggests that intercultural learning has taken place? There is a constant danger that, for example, suggestions of attitude change presented in questionnaires and interviews may have been produced by the students because they felt this is what was expected of them (this predicament is often known by Labov's term 'The observer's paradox'). Secondly, how should the researcher of intercultural learning deal with the issue of causality? How can we surmise that a change in learners' skills, knowledge or attitudes was due to this particular e-mail exchange and not due to other experiences in or outside of class? One of the German students involved in the first exchange realised this problem himself, when giving feedback on what he felt he had learned from the exchange: "Its difficult to divide my experiences from the e-mails and the experiences from my time in the USA."

Such questions can, perhaps, be partly solved by the triangulation of data and also by asking students in interviews and questionnaires to mention specific aspects or incidents of the project which led to them developing the particular attitude or skill in question.

3.5 Choosing Classes and Negotiating Entry

Having decided on my questions of research and on the appropriate methods of research, it was then necessary to choose appropriate groups of learners and to convince them to participate willingly in the telecollaborative projects. Various factors influenced my decision to choose these three particular groups of learners from among the many different classes which I taught over this two-year period.

First of all, the three German groups were enrolled in different types of courses. The first group were taking a course in 'Integrated Language Course II' (ILC2), a course for second or third year university students which usually involves a relatively low standard in English. This gave me the opportunity to assess the ability of relatively low-level learners to exploit the intercultural learning potential of on-line intercultural exchanges. The second group were enrolled in a course in Irish *Landeskunde*, meaning that I could explore the use of virtual language environments and on-line exchanges for developing a Cultural Studies approach to intercultural learning. Finally, the third group belonged to a class of 'Integrated Language Course III' (ILC3), a group of advanced learners of EFL who I expected to have sufficient linguistic competence to use ethnographic interviewing techniques with their partners.

My second reason for choosing these particular groups was more practical. Chappelle (1997) complains that many researchers assume that the benefits of one on-line technology are applicable to all of the other technologies as well. Of course, such an assumption is not accurate and I wanted the three case studies to explore how different on-line technologies might make different contributions to the development of learners' ICC. For this reason, in the first project a traditional e-mail exchange is combined with a 'Cultura-style' project (Fürstenberg et. al., 2001) based on on-line questionnaires and a message board exchange. As already mentioned, the course on Irish Cultural Studies involved a virtual learning environment which offered multi-media content and a message-board exchange with partners in Ireland. The third and final study gave learners the opportunity to use both e-mail and internet–based videoconferencing to carry out their ethnographic interviews with their partners in the USA. This combination of e-mail and videoconferencing gave me an interesting

opportunity to compare students' experiences in synchronous and asynchronous technologies.

Once I had identified the classes which I wished to study, it was then necessary to convince students to take part in the 'extra work' which being the subjects of research might involve. German students live busy lives which usually involves part-time jobs as well as many hours of class and study. For this reason, I imagined I might have difficulty persuading students to write to their partners regularly and also to take time to complete my questionnaires and take part in interviews outside of class time. Fortunately, for the most part this was not the case. I followed Agar (1980) who warns that ethnographers should present their subjects with some kind of 'exchange of services' or 'reciprocity'. This essentially means that participants deserve to feel that they are benefiting in some way from being the subject of investigation. Therefore, at the beginning of each course I explicitly made clear to the students that the projects meant they would have opportunities in their classes to use their English to communicate with native speakers and that they would also have opportunities to use Internet technologies in innovative and exciting ways. In return, I explained, I would want to learn how they learned from the experience and I would therefore ask them occasionally to give me their opinion on the projects. In all three classes no student openly complained to me about this arrangement. For the most part students were very reliable in their submission of feedback forms and their on-line correspondence and many times when I began an e-mail to a student apologising for the questions which I had for them, their replies insisted that it did not bother them. For example, during the final exchange, one student wrote: "Don't worry about asking me questions about this project. I appreciate your interest in this."

Having now established the research questions and the qualitative techniques which I will use to find answers to them, the following three chapters examine three classes at the University of Essen which employed network-based learning activities.

4. Integrating Intercultural Exchanges into the Foreign Language Classroom

"The interesting thing about this activity is that you're forced to look at your own culture and everyday life from another point of view. Boring or usual things become special. I liked that." *Wibke, from Germany, talking about her e-mail exchange.*

4. 1 Introduction

This chapter reports on the first of three studies based on action research which I carried out at the University of Essen. The study examines the development of a class of German students' ICC based on their participation in two on-line intercultural exchange projects. The results of the study will help to highlight both the potential and the limitations of such exchanges for the purposes of learning to interact successfully with members of other cultures.

This chapter provides, in section 4.2, an overview of how these particular exchanges were organised as well as a profile of the German group. Section 4.3 discusses issues such as how the exchange was monitored by the teachers and how it was integrated into our classes. Following this, section 4.4 looks in detail at how the e-mail exchange contributed to the development of the different aspects of ICC, while section 4.5 looks at the learning which took place during the second, web-based exchange. Section 4.6 explores the important issue of the role of the teacher in networked exchanges, while 4.7 discusses the question of how the socio-cultural context in which the different classes were located influenced the outcome and success of the cultural learning process. Finally, section 4.8 summarises the findings of the research.

4.2 Project Background

The exchange reported in this section took place between students taking a degree in English Studies at the University of Essen, Germany and two different groups of American students at the University of Clemson, South Carolina and at Michigan University in Michigan. The two exchanges lasted one academic term from mid-October 2001 to mid-February, 2002. The first of the two phases of on-line intercultural contact for the group of German students in Integrated Language Course (ILC) II in Essen involved an e-mail exchange with a class taking a course in Intercultural Communication at Clemson University. In the second phase, from January to February 2002, the German students went on to do a web-based exchange (based on the *Cultura* model described in section 2.4.1) with students of German as a Foreign Language at the University of Michigan. This extended period of contact with the German group at Essen gave me the opportunity, as classroom researcher, to study the effects of prolonged virtual intercultural contact on foreign language learners.

4.2.1 Profile of the German Class

The ILC II class in Essen consisted of 19 students, most of whom were German, however there were four students who came from Russia, the Ukraine, Turkey and Croatia respectively. The course was intended to prepare students for their *Zwischenprüfung*, an obligatory exam which is taken by students at the half-way stage of their degrees in English. Many of the students also came to class hoping for opportunities to put their knowledge of English into practice as they felt their speaking skills were not given sufficient attention in the other, more theoretical parts of their degree. Although all the German students reported having already had experience with the Internet, six of the students did not have e-mail accounts at the beginning of the course. I explained to these students that the e-mail exchange would be an important part of the course and by the third week of class all students had acquired e-mail addresses. This was not considered a particularly great demand on the students as the University of Essen offered students free web-based e-mail accounts and, at the time (2001), it was becoming more and more common for students to use e-mail to register for classes or to submit written homework in electronic form. Nevertheless, the students reported in an early round of feedback that this was the first time that they had engaged in such an activity. Their initial impression was that the e-mail exchange would be an

extremely positive experience as it allowed them to put their language into active use and they also considered it a very 'personal' form of language and culture learning.

Only six of the nineteen students had actually been to the USA before and only one of these six students had spent any longer than a few weeks in the country. In one of the first classes, students were asked to write a short essay on their image of America and this revealed some interesting insights into the topic. Although many students mentioned negative aspects, such as Americans' supposed ignorance of European culture (5 comments), the country's excessive influence as a superpower (3 comments) and their lack of interest in environmental protection (3 comments), many students also referred to the multicultural nature of American society (4 comments) and the pride which Americans usually have in their country (3 comments). Interestingly, the e-mail exchange with Clemson began only five weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. I got the impression from my interaction with the German students in our classes that this fact had increased the group's interest in taking up contact with American partners. Students appeared interested in gaining a personalised insight into how Americans were reacting to the events. However, in the final review of the exchange, a large number of students (seven) admitted that they had actually avoided discussing this topic with their partners as they believed, in the words of one of the students, that " it was too complicated" and because they felt the American opinion would be too different to their own. Another student, Wibke, explained: "I didn't want to discuss Sept 11th because it was such a delicate topic and I think our attitudes are too different to make sure you don't insult one another". This can, perhaps, be considered a missed opportunity on an intercultural learning level. Students could have attempted to learn more about the foreign perspective on this topic, even if they did not want to enter into debate about the rights and wrongs of this political crisis.

4.2.2 Establishing the Exchange

I made contact with Nancy, the teacher of the class at Clemson University, by sending a request for a partner in an English-speaking country on the IECC mailing list[12]. She responded saying that she was teaching a class on Intercultural Communication and would like her students to write up an account of their e-mail

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[12] http://www.iecc.org/

contact with the German group as one of their four assignments for the course. We then engaged in a series of e-mails in which we negotiated how we would like the exchange to develop. As none of the American students spoke German it was agreed that the correspondence between students would take place completely in English. Unfortunately, our classes were destined to have limited time together as the American group had started in August and were due to finish in late December. My group, on the other hand, would only be beginning in mid-October and would not finish until February.

With regard to what our students would write about, I was eager that the tasks would be based on key principles of intercultural learning. Therefore, when the tasks were being decided on, certain key principles of intercultural learning were taken into account: The exchange should encourage:

- reflection on both the target and home cultures
- intense negotiation and dialogue between students, as opposed to merely exchanging information
- looking beyond facts and figures and identifying the values and principles which underlie them
- greater awareness of variation and difference within national cultures.

With these principles in mind, and taking into account suggestions from our students, Nancy Jackson and myself agreed that our exchange would be based around the 'umbrella topic' of a comparison of German and Northern American university life. This would include the sub-topics of student-professor relationships, the two countries' education systems and their underlying values and principles. The Clemson group were to be assessed by writing an essay based on their correspondence with their German partners about this topic, while the Essen group were required to write a comparative essay on some aspect of University life in the two countries. The project was planned to develop in the following way: The exchange was to begin by students from both universities sending an introductory e-mail to their partners which included a description of themselves and what they were studying, as well as an overview of their plans for the future. This was then followed by the second task which required students to exchange essays about their home universities and then to discuss the content of these essays. The third task involved students interviewing each other on a chosen aspect of the university systems in the two countries. The final activity was based on an exchange of e-mails comparing interpretations of the film 'American Beauty' which the German

group watched together in class. Students in both classes were required to write at least once a week to their partner.

As I was aware that the Clemson class would be coming to an end in mid December, I returned to the IECC mailing list in early November in order to find a partner who would be willing to engage in a brief exchange with my class from mid-January to mid-February. Karl-Georg ('Kalli' in his e-mails), a German teacher at the University of Michigan, contacted me almost immediately regarding the possibility of working with his second year class of learners of German and, from then until the end of our exchange in February, an intensive exchange of e-mails and phone calls took place between us in order to reach agreement on how the short period (in reality only three weeks) of contact between our classes could best be exploited. We decided that we would like to use the word association exercise which was developed in the *Cultura* project (Furstenberg et. al., 2001) as this would allow for a potentially rich source of material for cultural analysis within both classrooms. Kalli was supported by an experienced technical co-ordinator (Philomena) who was willing to create the templates for the word association exercise as well as the on-line discussion forums where students from both classes could 'meet' on-line to discuss each others' findings. Over fifty e-mails were exchanged between the three of us in order to discuss issues such as precise deadlines for postings, on-line etiquette, language choice and the number of minimum postings to the discussion forum. Kalli and myself also exchanged some background information on our students' backgrounds and on current 'issues' in our local areas in order to find word associations which would be of interest to both groups and which would suitably highlight cultural differences. The great amount of time invested in the planning and creation of this exchange (and the great deal of negotiation which was required with the partner teacher) should serve to underline the heavy demands on the teacher which this type of network-based learning can involve.

An overview of the complete set of tasks carried out by the German group with their two sets of American partners can be seen below in table 4.1.

Task	Partner Class	Title	Description	Aim
1	Clemson University, South Carolina	Introductory e-mail to partner	Students talk about themselves and their future aspirations.	Introducing students to each other
2	Clemson University, South Carolina	"Likes and dislikes about my home university"	Students write an essay about their home university. This is then sent with an e-mail to partner. This is followed by discussion about the content of the essays.	Reflection on home culture and environment. Insight into how members of target culture experience their own culture
3	Clemson University, South Carolina	Interviewing partners for Essay writing	Students write an essay for their home class based on interviews with partners about aspects of university life in the two countries.	Comparative analysis of values and perspectives which underlie student life in both countries.
4	Clemson University, South Carolina	Comparing reactions to 'American Beauty'	Both sets of students watch the movie and discuss their reactions and analysis of the film.	Contrasting German and American interpretations of a cultural product.
5	University of Michigan	Self-introductions and plans for the future on on-line discussion forum	German and Michigan group get to know each other by posting self-introductions and responding to others' postings	Introducing students to each other. Also, getting used to new on-line platform.
6	University of Michigan	Word association exercises	Students write the associations which they have of key words such as "the future", and "the body". They then compare their reactions with their partners' and explore the differences in an on-line forum (Furstenberg et. al., 2001: 57).	Students become more aware of the perspectives and values which influence behaviour in different cultures.

Table 4.1: Overview of Tasks

4.3 Monitoring and Integrating the Exchange

Apart from agreeing on the topics for the exchange between Essen and Clemson, I was eager to establish whether Nancy would be integrating the project into her classes. Previous experience and accounts from the literature had shown me that students often lost interest and performed less successfully in on-line exchanges when they did not receive guidance and support in the classroom. Bruce Roberts, one of the founders of the IECC e-mail exchange network, explains the difference between effective and ineffective approaches to dealing with e-mail exchanges in the following way:

> "There is a significant difference in educational outcome depending on whether a teacher chooses to incorporate e-mail classroom connections as
> --an ADD-ON process, like one would include a guest speaker, or
> --an INTEGRATED process, in the way one would include a new textbook.
> The e-mail classroom connections process seems sufficiently complex and time-consuming that if there are goals beyond merely having each student send a letter to a person at a distant school, the ADD-ON approach can lead to frustration and less-than-expected academic results… On the other hand, when the e-mail classroom connection processes are truly integrated into the ongoing structure of homework and classroom interaction, then the results can be educationally transforming." (Roberts, cited in Warschauer, 1999)

However, based on her initial comments to me by e-mail, Nancy appeared to be taking an alternative approach to how the exchange should be organised. One of her mails included the following comment:

```
E-mail is terrific sometimes. And this is a good idea. Do you think
there is any need to monitor the discussions or just exchange e-mail
addresses and let the students handle the rest?"
```
E-mail Extract 4.1

This reflects another common approach among teachers to e-mail exchanges that students should be encouraged to take full responsibility for their partnership and the e-mails which they send and receive. In this way it is hoped that networked exchanges will help to develop learner independence and autonomy. Although I did not strictly agree with Nancy's approach, I pointed out that it would be possible for us to each deal with the exchange in our classes as we considered appropriate. I explained that I would be trying to integrate the exchange into my classes and that I would monitor what was being written and received by our students by requesting them to 'cc' all mails to us.

Nancy did not respond to this and she reported later that she had not asked students to send copies of their mails to her. However, she did regularly discuss the exchange in class with her students and, as part of her students' final evaluation, she required them to submit printouts of all their mails as well as a piece of writing reporting on what they had learned. As originally planned, I did ask my students to forward to me copies of all messages which they sent to or received from their partners. I received copies of most of the messages although close study of some of the mails revealed students referring to information from previous mails which I had not seen. On these occasions I wrote to the individual students involved, asking them to send on the mail which they or their partner had written but which I had not received. In all cases the students sent on these missing mails in a matter of days.

The question of whether teachers have the right to see the mails which their students write to their partners is, from my experience, one which often arises when teachers discuss e-mail exchanges. Donath (1997: 264) insists that e-mails should be seen by teachers as they are written as part of a school-based e-mail exchange and, as such, do not belong to students' private lives, but rather to their school work. Furthermore, students are developing texts which are going to be read by someone from a different cultural background and they will need the help and guidance of the teacher in creating texts which are clear and have the desired effect on the reader. As was seen earlier, the well-known 'Tandem' system of intercultural partnerships (Brammerts and Kleppin, 2001) also sees an important role for the tutor, however Appel and Mullen (2000) suggest that teachers should not necessarily have access to the content of their students' e-mails in order to "preserve the student's sense of privacy in their writing" (2000: 297). Similarly, Sebastian, a student from this particular exchange, admitted to being worried about forwarding the e-mails which he was sending and receiving. When he was asked in a mid-term survey whether he found it useful discussion the e-mail correspondence in class he gave the following response:

> I think it might be necessary, just to keep it going. But on the other hand it seems uncomfortable to me that I would actually like to discuss (up to a certain degree) rather "private", or non-superficial subjects, but my e-mails have to be forwarded to at least two people. And the content might be the topic of our next meeting...

This appears to be a fair point but not sharing the 'private' content of the e-mails with the instructor is likely to have negative consequences for the pedagogical success of e-mail exchanges. Firstly, it is not practical to tell students that they only send their teachers copies of messages which are related to the topic of the exchange. As an exchange develops, most mails will contain a section which is "on-task" and another which is "off-task" and refers to private aspects of the learners' lives. Furthermore, both Müller-Hartmann (1999a) and Fischer (1997) underline the importance of students opening up to each other on a personal level before intercultural learning can take place. Therefore, if intercultural learning is to be successfully studied and supported (as was the aim of this exchange) then it is vital for the teacher/researcher to be able to observe the off-task interaction which is taking place.

At the beginning of the course I was careful to clarify to students why they should send me copies of their mails. I explained that I would try to integrate the topics and language of the exchange into our classroom learning and that I also wanted to observe the exchange in my role as a classroom researcher. Besides the comments from this one student, I did not receive any negative feedback about the issue of monitoring. In fact, many students acknowledged the value of reading and discussing each other's mails in the worksheets which I created for class.

The worksheets which I developed were usually built around one particular aspect of the exchange. One which was used early in the exchange (see class worksheet 4.1 below) showed two sample e-mail messages (taken from previous exchanges) and provided a basis for a discussion on the type of information which partners need to receive in order to gain insight into the foreign culture. Another worksheet (class worksheet 4.2 below) showed a list of questions about German life and culture which different learners had received from their American partners in the previous two weeks.

Worksheet One
As you read these e-mails, consider what you actually learn about the other culture.

Email No.1: University Life in Germany
200 words for university life in the whole of Germany – that's not enough room. So I decided to write something about the university of Essen. That is still not enough room. But that's just the way it is. In Essen there are about 23.500 students. For Germany that is a quite normal number. It is possible to study many different subjects, so there are many different people. In the summer most people sit outside on the lawn. Learning is impossible here because as soon as you open a book some people you know will find you and restrain you from reading. That's a good moment for thinking of staying away from some boring compulsory lecture or some overcrowded seminar.

Apart from that there is not much university life. Of course there are sports courses, concerts and other events, and there are even people who go there. But normally people do not go to events at their university every week. Many students just go to university to study there and have their circle of friends somewhere else. So there is no reason for them to spend their free time at university. Most people do not identify with their university. A university is less a community than a place for learning.

E-mail No.2: The English and the Spanish.
Comparing the English and the Spanish, the Spanish are not afraid to express their feelings, unlike the English are. And that could seem like arrogance to many foreigners. But, as Paxman [the author of the texts on England] says, this is only because it is part of their culture to protect their privacy in a way which may seem quite closed to others. The author also makes a link to the fact that the majority of the English own the house in which they live. There is a very strong sense of privacy, and owning one's house means more intimacy and privacy. But this doesn't seem to me to be very different from other countries. Paxman relates all this to the fact that England is an island, but I don't believe that this has much to do with the cold characteristics. I relate it more to the climate which doesn't allow people to stay out on the street or in other public places for a long time. For this reason people in the street never talk to each other because if they are there, it is because they are doing something in particular. They are not going for a walk in order to pass the time and see if they meet someone they know in order to have a chat.

Class Worksheet 4.1

Questions From Abroad
How would you answer these questions from our American partners?
Discuss with your group and then report to the class.

1. [In a relationship] are there certain things that the men do (like pay for dinner or drive)? Are there certain things that you should never do or that seem rude? Where would you go on a first date? How would you get there? What would you eat? Is it more formal or more casual?
YOUR ANSWER:

2. In my gender class we were talking gay and lesbian relationships. We spoke about how they weren't seen or accepted as much here in the south as they are up north. Do you see many gays or lesbians at your school? Are they open about it or is it not even an issue?
YOUR ANSWER:

3. It seems like here people get uncomfortable talking about it (homosexuality) and they want to pretend like it doesn't exist. It is kind of the same way with interracial relationships. Do you see many students dating different races? Is it seen as a problem or looked down on?
YOUR ANSWER:

4. I would also like to know some more about Germany in general. I don't know very much about it, except I have heard that it is very racist, rigid, and authoritarian. To what extent is that true?
YOUR ANSWER:

5. Is your country cultural or individual? In some cultures the values and beliefs of a culture are more important than the beliefs and values of individuals. Which of these is Germany and why?
YOUR ANSWER:

6. Is your culture orientation to history or is it future related? Some cultures are here and now, but others focus on the future. Which is Germany and why?
YOUR ANSWER:

Class Worksheet 4.2

When dealing with the second of these worksheets, students were asked to work in groups and propose answers for these questions. In this way, students were engaged in a useful intercultural learning activity which challenged them to provide comprehensive answers about cultural behaviour and values in their country. As the example from the class transcript below shows, this activity also brought students to reflect on differences in cultural meaning and significance which a word or term can have. The students, for example, were asked to give their reactions to the first question which had come from one of their American partners. Having discussed this in groups, the following discussion took place:

Ipcevit: The first date would be in a cinema and getting there by tram
Teacher: if you go to eat who pays? Would it be 50/50?
Ipcevit: 50/50
Teacher: Did everybody come to that conclusion?
Ann: We also said the first date would be in a cinema, restaurant or a café. And we said that it would be more casual than formal because we are young people and students and …who would pay? Sometimes the boy would pay or sometimes separated?
Teacher: So it's not a big thing about the boy paying?
Ann: It's very nice if the boy would pay
Class: [laughter]
Ann: Normally today both pay together
Teacher: Does everyone agree with that? Sebastian, do you agree with that?
Sebastian: I would yeah, what I wanted to say that I think for the Americans the first date has a totally different meaning than we have here. A friend of mine is from Washington and she told me that to date someone automatically means the start of a certain type of relation. So you are already pretty close to each other. And I think you can see that if you read the question. 'how would you go there?' I think it would be more common for the boy to pick up the girl and shake the father's hand and to make a good impression.

Class Extract 4.1

In this case, the question not only encouraged students to think about their own behaviour, but it also gave this particular student insight into the cultural significance of the term 'dating' in the USA. By discussing these different meanings in class, students were being prepared to take these differences into account when corresponding with their American partners.

Apart from worksheets related to the writing and analysis of e-mails, many other activities related to the exchange were carried out in the classes in Essen. Students visited the websites of the universities of Clemson[13] and Michigan[14]. They also read extracts of texts related to personal accounts of German-American interaction and discussed aspects of American life as depicted in various films extracts. In each class the students were asked for feedback on how they felt the exchange was going and (in the period of the e-mail exchange) if they were receiving messages from their partner. If students on either side reported to their teacher that they were not receiving mails from their partner then this was communicated immediately to the other teacher who checked in with the student in question.

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[13] http://www.clemson.edu/
[14] http://www.umich.edu/

4.4. Research findings

4.4.1 Introduction

This section sets about answering the central question of this study which were introduced earlier in section 4.2. This involves looking at to what extent do on-line intercultural exchanges support the development of language learners' intercultural communicative competence. This first section (section 4.3) focuses on the e-mail exchange with Clemson, while section 4.4 looks at the web-based exchange with Michigan. The research data and findings have been organised according to the different components of Byram's model (i.e. knowledge, attitudes, awareness and skills) to which it is seen to refer. However, this should not take away from the fact that students' feedback, interviews and performance often involved various aspects of intercultural competence.

4.4.2 Knowledge of Social Groups and their Products and Practices

The data gathered in this project would seem to suggest that e-mail exchanges can make a substantial contribution to students' knowledge of the target culture. However, the *type* of cultural information which students are sending and receiving can be seen to differ greatly from that which learners are usually presented with in their language classes and textbooks. Roberts et al. (2001) criticise the traditional approach to cultural information in foreign language teaching for the following reasons:

> "information about political structures, regional or economic policy or the history of changing national boundaries might be useful background knowledge, but it is essentially book-based information, usually presented as facts in an unproblematic way and abstracted from the everydayness of people's ordinary lives." (2001: 42)

In contrast, Byram's description of the types of knowledge necessary for intercultural competence involves a much more critical approach to the cultural products and practices of a country. This includes historical relationships between the home and target cultures, the national memory of the target culture, processes and institutions of socialisation, norms of social interaction, the country's institutions and its people's perceptions of them. Furthermore, Byram underlines that it is necessary not

only to have knowledge of these issues, but also to be aware of how the socialisation process in each particular country has shaped the way in which they are perceived:

> "At one level, it is well-known that tea-drinking has different significance in different cultures, at another level a policy document on 'the centralisation of education' might be 'conservative' in one context and 'progressive' in another. The significance of behaviour or document cannot be taken for granted." (1997a: 37)

Analysis of the e-mail correspondence and the students' feedback reveal it is this connection between factual information about the target culture's products and practices and how these are perceived and valued in the particular culture which e-mail exchanges can most effectively bring to light. An extract from one of the first e-mails from Nadja's American partner Katrin shows this:

```
The country is divided up into 50 states, which make up about 6-7
regions. I live in the southeast. The regions each have things that
make them unique, and one thing that people say about the south is
that everyone is very friendly and polite. Also, things here progress
at a slower pace or people take their time doing things here, there is
not a rush.
```
E-mail Extract 4.2

Here, Nadja begins to find out factual information about the states (the north –south divide) and then finds out how this divide is perceived by ordinary Americans in terms of character ("people say about the south is that everyone is very friendly and polite"). In other words, the German student is exposed to an important cultural connotation of factual, geographical information about the USA.

Nadja's reply to this mail also serves to highlight this type of factual information being exchanged by e-mail and how this can contribute to intercultural competence:

```
You asked me what kind of teacher I want to become. That is a little
bit difficult to explain as I suppose that professional (or
vocational???) education is different in the USA. I looked the word up
in a dictionary and if I translate it (I hope I do it the right way) I
want to become a teacher at a "vocational college". That means I'm
going to teach people who take an apprenticeship. But I think I should
tell your more about the German education system. After primary school
(which ends after 4 years, then the average pupil is 10 years old)
pupils have to decide (depending from their grades) which type of
school they want to go to. There are three types: the "Hauptschule",
the "Realschule" and the "Gymnasium". There is also a "Gesamtschule"
which combines this three types.

 The Hauptschule imparts basic knowledge and is for people who later
want to take an apprenticeship as a manual worker. It takes six years,
so you are 16 when you start an apprenticeship. Pupils who want to go
to university or want to get a "higher" job in an office, a bank etc.
go to the Gymnasium. The final exam which gives you the opportunity to
go to university is called "A-levels" in Britain - so I thought you
would know the tem, too. How are your final school exams called? The
time at the Gymnasium takes nine years, so I was 19 when I passed my
exams. The Realschule is something between Hauptschule and Gymnasium.
A lot of people who go to the Gymnasium don't necessarily study. Some
of them first take an apprenticeship like I did. The German
apprenticeship is divided into a theoretical and a practical part. In
most cases people work in an enterprise (factory, office, shop etc.
depending from the job they chose to learn) three or four days a week
where they learn the practical stuff. The other one or two days, they
attend a vocational college (which is public) where the theory is
taught (that's what I want to do when I'm a teacher). It takes three
years in general, but this differs, and end with theoretical and
practical exams. This system is called "Duales System".

I heard that in the USA such an apprenticeship is not common. In most
cases people start to work when they finish High School without
getting this kind of education. Is this right? In Germany, people who
didn't take an apprenticeship earn less money and often loose their
jobs. I suppose this is different in America.(?) Nearly everyone takes
it and there are special laws made by the government which settle
professional education and the exams. I hope this was not to confusing
- if you have any questions, just ask.
```
E-mail Extract 4.3

There are various aspects of this e-mail worthy of attention in regard to how cultural knowledge is dealt with in e-mail exchanges. Firstly, although her 'factual' information is not always very accurate, Nadja manages to communicate to her partner a great deal of what could be 'dry' factual information about the German education system in an interesting, human manner by constantly referring to her own personal experience (e.g. "so I was 19 when I passed my exams", "Some of them first take an apprenticeship like I did", "that's what I want to do when I'm a teacher") and by regularly asking her partner to compare this system to her own (e.g. "I suppose that professional (or vocational???) education is different in the USA", "I suppose this is different in

America.(?)"). This informal, personal style may motivate students more to study and learn this information than if it had been presented to them in a textbook.

Secondly, Nadja's message not only offers Kirstin information about the organisation of the German educational system but also allows her to gain an insight into the significance of vocational education in German society. Nadja's constant comparisons with the American system (e.g. "I heard that in the USA such an apprenticeship is not common") also ensure that her partner does not equate the German system with that of America.

However, other research into e-mail exchanges points out that the cultural information which students exchange with each other should not be seen as a complete replacement for traditional *'Landeskunde'* classes. Kern (1997) warns that the personal viewpoints expressed in e-mail correspondence can lead to "superficial apprehension of foreign cultural phenomena" (1997: 75) and that such information should be counterbalanced with material from textbooks and other resources. Kleppin (1997) also suggests that e-mails are better suited for revealing the norms and values underlying the target culture and the cultural associations which words and terms carry as opposed to factual and statistical information about the culture itself. She goes on to make the following warning:

> "Die Tandempartner werden außerdem z.B. meist wenig motiviert sein, Themen wie Arbeitslosigkeit, Umweltschutz o.ä. in ihren Ländern zu vergleichen, sie werden sich hingegen eher etwas darüber erzählen wollen, wie ein Bekannter, Verwandter oder Freund mit Arbeitslosigkeit umgeht." (1997: 85)

This point is, to a great extent, confirmed in the content of the e-mails exchanged in this project and also in the following section of the final feedback form completed by the German group at the end of the project. When asked what students learned about the American lifestyle and culture, two main types of cultural knowledge were referred to. Firstly, students made reference to Americans' feelings towards aspects of their culture (for example, "religion and family are very important for them (Olga)", "Americans think a lot more about their families than I had thought (Iryna)", "young people rather go to house parties rather than discos (Janette)"). Secondly, the students identified more personal aspects of behavioural culture as opposed to statistical information

(relationships, going out, aspects of family life, "distinctions between the north and the south (Anna)" "university life – parties, sororoties, sports (Wibke)") than to any factual information.

The difference between factual information and personal perspectives was also highlighted in the case of Olga – the Russian student in the German group. She received a great deal of information about how her partner would be celebrating Thanksgiving in the USA but never received any answer to her requests for information about the historical origins of the holiday. To remedy this, in class we looked at various websites which explained the background and significance of the holiday.

The limited nature of the type of information which e-mail partners usually exchange with each other should not come as a surprise to teachers. I would suggest that students should not be expected to be 'experts' who can provide factual and statistical descriptions about their home culture and it is unfair to expect them to carry out such tasks – at least not without the necessary support from relevant resources and the teacher. It may be (as will be seen later) that an intercultural e-mail exchange is the catalyst for learners to begin reflecting more on their home culture and seeing a need to inform themselves more about it. In any case, teachers need to be aware that e-mail correspondence can be a powerful supplement to traditional '*Landeskunde*' materials – showing the different perspectives and experiences related to the facts and the figures – but it should not be seen as a replacement for such materials.

A final example of the type of knowledge exchanged by students in this project refers to the complex cultural connotations which words or expressions can carry. Although this is not specifically mentioned in Byram's list of objectives for cultural knowledge, the need to be aware that the cultural meanings or connotations of words are not necessarily the same as their connotations in the other language is constantly referred to in work on intercultural communication (Kleppin, 1997; Scollon and Scollon, 1994). Fischer states that:

> "translations from one to the other language always play a big role in German-American communication… the importance of teaching our students how to translate and how to find the most appropriate word in the target language cannot be emphasised enough. Does 'nationalistisch' really

mean the same to a German speaker as 'nationalistic' to an American speaker(1997: 13)?"

Julianna found two possible examples of these culturally-loaded terms in one of her e-mails from her partner and, in her response, asked her to explain them:

```
Could you tell me more detailed about tailgating! And could you
explain me the meaning of the word "southern". I think, I understand
its meaning, but I'm not sure.
```
E-mail Extract 4.4

Her partner's response contained detailed descriptions of what the terms signified in her local culture and illustrate how different the cultural meanings would have been from any definitions Julianna would have found in a dictionary:

```
You asked about tailgating.  Tailgating is long standing Clemson
tradition.  Basically tailgating is just eating and hanging out before the
football game outside your car.  For example, we have a football game this
Sat. at 1:00 PM against Duke University.  All the students will be dressed
and ready for the game by 10 AM and will be going from car to car drinking
and eating tons of food before the game.  Its awesome!

Ok, southern and northern.  When you're from the south, that means you're
typically from all the southern states....south carolina, georgia,
Louisiana, Alabama… etc.  Southern people are typically characterized as
friendly, they talk slow, they're very proud of their past and the
confederate flag, but they're also more racist against black people down
here.  They also have a different accent than people in the north...its
like this drawl or something.
If you've ever seen the movie Gone with the Wind, then you'll know what I'm
talking about. Now, northerners on the other hand (people from New York,
New Jersey, Maryland, Rhode Island,etc)  are completely different.  They
are very loud, boisterous, and talk extremely fast.  Some people
characterize them as rude because they don't have the manners that southern
people do...(like opening the car door for girls, and holding doors and
stuff like that) They're accent is nasal....It is kind of hard to describe
the accents. However, northerners are more diverse and more accepting of
other races. Describing southern and northern people is hard, but I hope
that helped you out.
```
E-mail Extract 4.5

This example shows the rich insights into a culture's products and practices which questions such as those from Julianna can reveal. The challenge, as will be seen in section 4.4.5, is for students to be able to identify such culturally loaded terms in the e-mails which they receive and then to elicit their meaning and significance from their partners.

4.4.3 Attitudes of Curiosity and Openness

Risager (1998) in her review of approaches to the cultural dimension of foreign language learning, explains that, in contrast to previous approaches, the intercultural approach no longer expects students to take on simply positive attitudes towards the target culture and its members. Instead, she explains that the approach encourages learners to:

> "develop a reflective attitude to the culture and civilisation of their own country. The teaching may be characterised by attitudes of cultural relativism, the wish for a non-ethnocentric view of the countries involved." (1998: 244)

Similarly, Byram's model suggests that learners need attitudes of curiosity and openness to the target culture and, most importantly, a willingness to discover alternative perspectives on products and practices in both the home and target cultures in order to be successful intercultural communicators (Byram, 1997a: 57). The ability to appreciate how something is perceived from an alternative cultural viewpoint is described by Byram as 'decentring', but, as was seen in chapter one, it has become better known internationally as 'intercultural understanding' and is seen by many as the key element of intercultural learning (Bredella, 2002; Bredella and Christ, 1995; Bredella and Delanoy, 1999; Bechtel, 2001).

According to Cummins and Sayers (1995), learners can be led to reflect on their own environment and culture and to view it from a different perspective by interacting with foreign partners and answering their questions about the home culture. They describe this as 'distancing' and cite Gervilliers et al's explanation of the principle:

> "The student, because she needs to describe them, develops an awareness of the conditions of her life, of the life of her town or her neighbourhood, even of her promise…She had been living too close to these conditions and through inter-school exchanges she distanced herself from them in order to better comprehend the condition of her life."Gervilliers et al., 1977 cited in Cummins and Sayers, 1995: 137)

By having to write about their own culture and then receiving feedback and more questions about their messages, many of the German students reported that this exchange had indeed brought them to reflect on their own culture and to look at the

values which underlie it from a different perspective. This was revealed over the answers to various questions in the end of term questionnaire:

Q.: Was it important for you what your partner thought about your country?	
Patricia	It's interesting to hear what other people think about Germany because most of the German people are so proud of their country and so uncritical. It's good to hear something else.
Sebastian	It's interesting to see my country through the eyes of a foreigner. It is always amusing to admit that some of their prejudices towards Germany are true.
Laura	Dadurch, dass man erfährt, was andere über die eigene "home culture" denken, reflektiert man selbst noch einmal und sieht vielleicht Dinge aus einer anderen Sicht bzw. in einem anderen Licht.

Table 4.2: The importance of hearing foreign perspectives on one's hom culture

Q.: How did you feel telling a foreigner about Germany / your home country? Was this aspect interesting for you?	
Frank	It was not interesting to tell them but to receive an answer about what I told.
Laura	Yes, of course. It was interesting. Vor allem, weil man dann auch mal über Fragen nachdenkt, über die man sich noch keine Gedanken gemacht hat (z.B. Essen gehen in Deutschland).
Valerie	Very interesting, it makes you think about it which you don't usually do very much.
Thorsten	Es war sehr interessant da man so selbst darüber nachdenkt, ob man das eine oder andere richtig sieht.

Table 4.2: The importance of telling about one's home culture

In these comments it is clear that the exchange raised some of the students' interest in how their culture was seen from an alternative perspective and actually brought them to reflect on what they had taken for granted until then. Students refer to seeing "my country through the eyes of a foreigner" and that the exchange process "makes you think about it [one's home culture] which you don't usually do very much". However, although this feedback seems to signal a willingness among many learners to recognise the existence of different cultural perspectives, quite a few other German students did not report this as being a result of their exchange (see fig. 4.1 below). Based on more detailed feedback from these learners and on references from the literature, various reasons can be found for this.
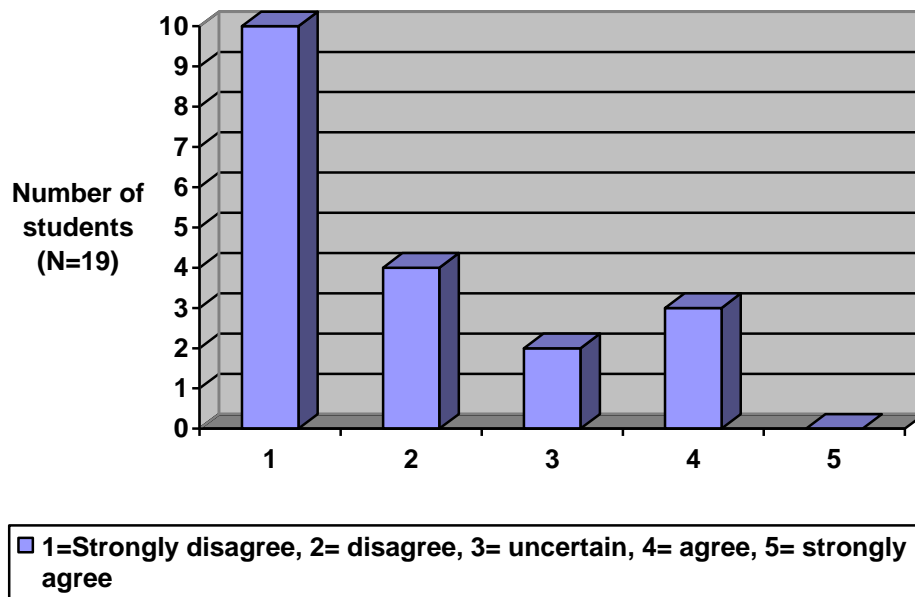
Fig. 4.1 The questions and comments from the American students influenced the way I see my own culture.

Three of the German group (Janette, Nadja and Wibke) tried to identify why this was the case when they suggested that the exchange had not lasted long enough for such a change to occur. This opinion is supported by the view in the literature that the development of a change in perspective as a long, complicated process. Kramsch (1994), Gnutzmann (1996) and Freundenstein (1996) all warn that bringing learners to see their own culture from another perspective is a slow, on-going process, the results of which are often never identified until long after the learning process.

Other students (Nicole, Pia and Olga) suggested that the exchange of e-mails had not led to any discussion which would bring them to such a change. This would seem to echo Müller-Hartmann's call for the teacher to develop activities which bring about the intense negotiation of meaning and which will thereby help students to decentre (1999a: 167). It had been hoped that the questions which students would pose for each other would bring them to such reflection, but perhaps, the activities which the students engaged in during this exchange did not bring about sufficient negotiation with their partners for them to become aware of alternative perspectives. The tasks in both the German and American classes required students to elicit information from their partners which would enable them to write (in the case of the Germans) a comparative essay or (in the case of the Americans) a report on their learning experience. For this reason, students were eager to get long mails full of descriptive information about the target

culture, but rarely did they see the point in negotiating or debating with their partner in order to bring them to explain their beliefs and perspectives in greater detail. Julianna received a typical message from her partner in the process of the exchange which is representative of the way in which information was elicited by the American students –

```
But PLEASE write me and tell me about German life...I want to know it
all!1  And if possible, if  you could email me back as soon as
possible, that would be FANTASTIC!  I'm going to start writing my
paper about German life according to your emails on Tuesday, and I
would really love to hear back from you before then if possible!
Thanks so much Julia!  You're the greatest!! (mail to Julia)
```
E-mail Extract 4.6

This lack of interaction may have led to a lack of critical reflection on the half of many students. Collaborative projects such as that described by Belz (2002) and projects based on the discussion of literature, such as that described by Müller-Hartmann (1999a), may provide more cause for intensive communication and thereby lead to a better insight into the other cultural perspectives. Other activities which were carried out later in the term between this German group and an American group at Michigan University also served to increase their awareness to other cultural perspectives. (These will be looked at in section 4.5)

4.4.4 Skills of Discovery and Interaction

It became clear at an early stage of the exchange that many students found it difficult to engage their partners in such a way in which they could acquire the appropriate information necessary in order to carry out their cultural analysis in their essays. Byram refers to this as the ability to "elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents or events…(1997a: 52)". This first became clear to me when many of the opening mails (from both sets of students) finished abruptly with open-ended comments such as "If you have any questions, just let me know" instead of comments which looked for more information from their partners or sought to expand discussions.

In an earlier study (O'Dowd, 2003), I found that learners who were able to establish a successful working relationship with their partners and were able to obtain the necessary information which they need to learn about the foreign culture, had learned to

integrate certain characteristics into their e-mail correspondence. These were found to be the following:

- They [the learners] took into account the socio-pragmatic rules of the partner's language when writing in that language.
- Apart from the basic information on the topic in question, they also provided their partner with analysis and personal opinions about the topic.
- They asked questions which encourage feedback and reflection from their partner.
- They tried to develop a personal ("friendly") relationship with their partner, as opposed to simply focussing on the tasks they had been given.
- They recognised and reacted to the needs and interests of their partner, answering their questions and encouraging them to write more about the topics which interested them.

Nadja's e-mail to her partner about the German education system (see section 4.4.2) is a good example of a message which includes many of these characteristics. She gives her partner her personal experience of the topic (the e-mail explains her experience of the German school system), she encourages feedback ("I suppose this is different in America?"), she tries to be friendly and helpful ("I hope this was not too confusing") and, as the topic of the e-mail came about due to questions from her partner, it is clear that the author is responding to their needs and interests. Although these characteristics may seem to be 'common sense' and 'obvious' at first glance, my experience in this and other exchanges has been that it was often not so obvious to students that they should nurture their intercultural relationship in such a way. In contrast to Nadja's correspondence, many of the mails sent and received by the German students consisted of a basic supply and request for information. The following mail sent by Ana-Marija, a student in the German class, towards the beginning of the exchange typifies this approach:

```
Hello!
I'm sorry that you had to wait so long to get my mail, but you can
imagine that it's more difficult for me to write a mail than for you,
because you probably don't need a dictionary (you know what I mean).
Now I will try to answer your questions. Let me start.
You asked me about the relationship between the students and the
professors. Well, our professors are not so cool like yours. Sure, you
can ask them questions, but the relationship is not like in the
school.

Now something about German drinking habits. Well, I guess that German
students drink a little bit more than the Americans. I don't like
alcohol at all, but when I go to parties I see that there are many
students who like it. You asked me about driving and German cars.
Well, the most of the students here have a car, but unfortunately I
don't.

Now I hope that you can answer me some questions. At first I would
like to know something about your campus and its outward appearance
.Than I would like you to tell me something about the organization at
your university, about your timetable ,the beginning of your terms.
Tell me something about your social life, about spending your free
time and about your hobbies. Do you have enough time for your hobbies
or do you have to learn a lot? Is there anything about your university
that you can complain of, are there any special problems? What about
your future? What are you going to do after the university? I hope to
here from you soon!
Thanks in anticipation !
```

E-mail Extract 4.7

Although this e-mail starts off in a friendly manner (in that she apologises for the delay in writing and refers to her difficulties in writing English), the remaining content would appear to leave her partner with little input to reflect on or to compare to his own culture. In reference to the rapport between professors and students at university in Germany, she suggests that "the relationship is not like in the school", however her partner never finds out what this relationship is German schools might have been like. Similarly, she goes on to suggest that "German students drink a little bit more than the Americans" without explaining why she believes this or without giving sufficient proof or examples as to why this may be so. The student then briskly moves on to the questions which she has for her partner ("Now I hope that you can answer me some questions"). These come in the form of a long list which is unrelated to the earlier content of her message. There is no explanation of why these particular questions are being asked or her partners' answers may contrast with answers from someone at a German university. Simply put, the American partner is unlikely to feel motivated to talk about these issues in any kind of revealing way, and, as they are missing input on the German perspective, they are unlikely to be aware of what aspects of their timetable,

university problems or hopes for the future are going to be of interest to their German partner. Possibly as a result of this style, the response which Ana-Marija received from her partner, Jaime, was quite distant in style and lacked input which might be considered very useful for intercultural learning. The message opened in the following way:

```
Hello again!
Clemson is beautiful- It has 17,000 students, but the campus is not too
big. The buildings are mostly made out of bricks and are beautiful and
there is a lot of grass areas and trees.  We start school in August and the
fall semester ends in December. Then we start our spring semester in
January and end in May.  We have summers off, but some students take summer
classes to catch up with other students or to get ahead…
```

E-mail Extract 4.8

Jaime begins the e-mail by simply saying "Hello again" and then goes immediately to the topic at hand. There is no attempt at further developing their relationship with 'off-task' comments or questions (as he had in earlier e-mails) and no reference is made to anything which Ana-Marija mentioned about German culture in her previous message. Furthermore, as is clear from the extract above, a superficial list of questions has led to a listing of superficial answers as well. Instead of an insight of how Jaime experiences university life in the USA, his partner merely finds out that "The buildings are mostly made out of bricks and are beautiful and there is a lot of grass areas and trees".

An overview of all the questioning techniques and requests for information used by both sets of students in the e-mail exchange make it possible to arrive at some general conclusions as to how learners can best develop the skills of discovery and interaction and achieve Byram's objective of eliciting the concepts and values of products and practices from members of the target culture (1997a: 52). Some of the common problematic approaches to eliciting information can be found in the following examples taken from the e-mails exchanged by the students:

1	It would be nice if you explained you school system to me in detail, so that I get a short overview over it. **Janette (Ger.) 14 Nov 2001**
2	My teacher really wants us to be able to show that we have learned something about German culture. What is the power distance like in Germany? Can you ask your professors questions at any time or do you have to wait until the end of the class. Are there any groups that have more power than others? Are men and women treated equally? How important is marriage? What are the major religions in Germany? **Abby (USA) – 23 Nov 2001**
3	Now I hope that you can answer me some questions. At first I would like to know something about your campus and its outward appearance. Than I would like you to tell me something about the organization at your university, about your timetable ,the beginning of your terms. Tell me something about your social life, about spending your free time and about your hobbies. Do you have enough time for your hobbies or do you have to learn a lot? Is there anything about your university that you can complain of, are there any special problems? **Ana-Marija (Ger.) 27 Nov. 2001**
4	Now I have a lot of questions for you please write to me back as soon as possible because I have to write an essay about what you will write back to me. How is university life organised? Do you have a well prepared timetable? When do your semesters start? What is the difference between college and university? How does your campus look like (outward appearance)? How old are your buildings? Do you have parties on campus? Do you have a scholarship? Where do you meet your friends during the week? How much do you have to work for university? Do you have a lot leisure time? How do you get to university (by car?)? Do you have to work beside university? **Thorsten (Ger.) 20 Nov. 2001**
5	Halloween is my favorite holiday, and it was OK this year, but I had a stressful week with lots of tests and work, so it was not so fun. How was your Halloween? Do you celebrate it differently in Germany than we do here? **Geer (USA) 15 Nov. 2001**
6	I also need to ask you some questions about Germany for a paper I will soon be writing. I need to ask you a few questions about your culture. I need to know about your dialectics. Is your culture cultural or individual? In some cultures the values and beliefs of a culture are more important than the beliefs and values of individuals. Which of these is Germany and why? Is your culture personal or contextual? When you meet someone; what information do you look for? Do you place them by family, status, or age (context) or by personal traits? Which applies to Germany and why? Is your culture different or similar? How much does the culture value individual differences or should people is similar? Do these apply to Germany and why? I know these sound kind of long and hard, but don't worry, they aren't. **Geer (USA) 16 Nov. 2001**

Table 4. 3 Examples of Weak Approaches to Eliciting Information

Several weaknesses can be identified here in these extracts, some of which reappear on more than one occasion. Example one is problematic as it is a very demanding request (i.e. asking someone to explain their country's complete school system) while not explaining what aspects of the school system are of interest or what the school system is like in the writer's home country. Students must be made aware that, in their role of cultural investigators, it is their task, firstly, to motivate their partners to write to them and, secondly, to elicit the appropriate type of information about the target culture. Vast, general questions such as this example are unlikely to achieve either of these aims.

A barrage of unrelated questions, as can be seen in examples two and three, are also unlikely to be motivating. Students who try to deal with such long lists may find them overwhelming and hard to deal with. As they do not come accompanied by explanations as to how these issues are seen in the other culture, students may find it hard to imagine what aspects of these issues will be of interest to their partners. Similarly, in example four, although the questions may all be related to one common theme, the long lost may simply prove overwhelming for the correspondent's partner. Finally, examples five and six show questions which may be impossible for the reader to answer as they do not have sufficient cultural or academic knowledge. In example five, the student in Germany is asked "Do you celebrate it [Halloween]differently in Germany than we do here?" but she is not told beforehand how Halloween is actually celebrated in the USA. The American student is assuming that her German partner will have enough knowledge to answer this question – something which should not be done at any stage. In example six, the same student refers to terminology and theoretical issues which she had dealt with in her classes in the questions which she poses for her partner. No examples or practical explanations are added to help her partner answer the questions. It is of little surprise that in this particular case the questions were simply ignored by the German student who received the mail.

In contrast to these techniques for obtaining information, students also used other approaches which were more successful in bringing about dialogue and eliciting insights on the foreign perspective. These can be seen in the examples below:

1	I also wanted to ask you if you were in a relationship right now. Are there certain things that the men do (like pay for dinner or drive)? Are there certain things that you should never do or that seem rude? Where would you go on a first date? How would you get there? What would you eat? Is it more formal or more casual? **Lea (USA) 20 Nov. 2001**
2	Could you tell me how your campus looks like (I have already seen a little bit on the Clemson-webpage) and if there are any parties on the campus. Is it usual to leave your family when you start studying? Have you got time for hobbies? You told me that sport is very important at your university. When you have parties, are there any "mottos"? In Essen there are often motto-parties like Beaujolais-Parties, Medicine-Parties, Costume-Parties etc. Do people drink alcohol there? **Nadja (Ger.) 19 Nov 2001**
3	We have had some foreign students come talk to our class about their experience with coming to the United States. Most of them remarked that they were expecting the US to be just like Hollywood movies. But it is not exactly like that. Some things are similar, but not all. They also said they thought it was strange how students had a friendship with their professors. Is it like that in Germany? Are you able to ask questions in class and talk to the teacher as if he is your friend? **Jaime (USA) 21 Nov. 2001**
4	**[Following a very detailed mail about uni life in Clemson]** As far as dealing with your professors, how does that differ from how I've explained it here at Clemson. Can you interrupt professors during a lecture to ask questions? The rest I will let up to you to explain any other differences that you see. **Leslie (USA) 29 Oct. 2001**
5	**[Following answers to his partner's questions]** Has anything I have said confused you or does anything seem strange to your culture? **Jaime (USA) 28 Nov 2001**

Table 4.4 Examples of Effective Approaches to Eliciting Information

In these examples, students can be seen to encourage useful responses by developing their questions as much as possible and making them appear easy to respond to. In the first example, instead of making a general, overwhelming request such as "Please tell me about relationships in your country", Lea broke down the cultural practice under investigation into manageable questions (Are there certain things that you should never do or that seem rude? Where would you go on a first date?) and her partner was able to reflect on and answer based on his own experiences. In the second example, Nadja bases her questions on information she has already received from her partner ("Have you got time for hobbies? You told me that sport is very important at your university.") and she uses examples from her home culture to illustrate what she means by her questions. She follows up her question "When you have parties, are there any 'mottos'?" with examples of motto parties in her own local area.

A second characteristic of successful questioning techniques is that the questions are often located in the sociocultural context of the writer. Students will first of all explain how a certain product or practice is experienced or viewed in their home culture

before asking their partner whether this is the case in the target culture as well. The writer explains the reason for asking the question and means that both partners stand to learn something from the interaction. This can be seen in example three when Jaime describes the relationship between professor and student in the USA before asking his partner to compare that with the situation in Germany. In this case, no previous knowledge about America is assumed by the American student writing the mail.

A final technique is the use of prompts or comments which specifically encourage the reader to reflect on what they have read and to compare this to their own experiences. This can be seen in examples four and five in table 4.4 when Leslie suggests to her partner that "The rest I will let up to you to explain any other differences that you see" and when Jaime asks "Has anything I have said confused you or does anything seem strange to your culture?". A summary of the weak and effective questioning techniques used by the students in this exchange is presented below in table 4.5:

Aspects of Weak Questioning Techniques	*Aspects of Effective Questioning Techniques*
Topic of question is exceedingly broad or general.	Questions are precise and are accompanied by examples in order to assist clarification.
Questions come out of context. It is unclear how the issues referred to in the questions are seen in writers' home culture.	Questions are located in a sociocultural context. Firstly, the reader is presented with the situation in the writer's home culture, so the reader can use this as a comparison.
Long lists of apparently unrelated questions are asked together.	Prompts are used regularly to encourage reflection and comparison
Questions implicitly assume some type of knowledge (either cultural or otherwise) on the part of the reader.	

Table 4.5: Weak versus Effective Questioning Techniques in E-mail Interaction

Of course, the techniques described here are not intended as a definitive approach to eliciting information in e-mail exchanges. As was referred to earlier in section 2.4.6, to make students more aware of different cultural perspectives Fischer (1998) suggests that learners engaging in e-mail exchanges need to be trained in the skills of ethnographic interviewing in order to find out and learn more from their virtual interaction. This approach to investigating another culture will be looked at in more detail in chapter six.

4.4.5 Critical Cultural Awareness and the Skills of Interpreting and Relating

At several times during this exchange, it became clear the difficulties which carrying out such on-line projects can involve for language learners. Not only were they being asked to interact with people they did not know, but we were also expecting them to do this in a foreign language (in the case of the German group, at least) and over a medium with which many of them were not familiar. Furthermore, we also expected these students to have well-refined investigative skills. They were not merely required to interact with their partners, but also to find out particular information about the target culture's products and practices (as was seen in the previous section) and then to interpret this from the perspective of someone from that culture. Unsurprisingly, many appeared unable to do this, and, having examined the data collected during this exchange, I believe that the skills of investigation and analysis are the aspects of intercultural competence which need to be given the most explicit attention before and during any intercultural exchange in order to make the activity worthwhile and effective. This section looks at the challenges of bringing students to interpret and relate information from the target culture as well as developing their critical cultural awareness.

Byram defines the interpretative skills of the intercultural speaker as the ability " to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own (1997a: 52)". Such skills are similar to those of the ethnographer who, through interaction with his/her informants, gradually builds a picture of the culture which is being studied *from the perspective of someone within that culture*. However, it also requires learners to be able to relate behaviour in the target culture to behaviour which holds similar significance in the home culture. Such skills need to be learned and need to be accompanied by a critical approach to culture which involves an understanding that cultural products and practices, which may appear similar on a superficial level, will not necessarily have the same significance in the target culture as they do in the home culture. This is what Byram refers to as 'critical cultural awareness' or 'political education' (1997a: 53). The data collected in this course highlights the fact that such an understanding of culture and the related skills of interpreting and relating can not be taken for granted in language learners and they

should therefore receive explicit training and development by the teacher in these aspects of ICC.

Evidence for this came to light in the German class when we worked on a worksheet containing extracts of e-mails which we had received from Clemson. One of the extracts discussed was the following:

```
I guess I'll just tell you about myself. I've grown up in Simpsonville, SC.
It's a small town, but it's fairly close to a lot of big cities. I love it.
It was a lot of fun growing up. I ran track and cross country through my
middle and high school years and year at Bowling Green State University
before transferring to Clemson. I work for an East Coast Hockey League team
called the Greenville Grrrowl. You can go to our teams website,
www.grrrowl.com. It's under construction now, but it should be up soon. I
work in media relation and public relations. I love it. I'm in my third
season working for the team and I hope to get hired on full time after I
graduate. I have a boyfriend that I've been dating for a year and 6 months.
We met at church. We hope to get married next December.
```
E-mail Extract 4.8

Having read the mail, there was a general reaction of chuckles and titters in the classroom. In the subsequent discussion many students suggested that this girl seemed to represent a stereotypical American. I asked Janette, the German student who actually had this girl as her partner, how she had reacted to the mail. She seemed to be rather dismissive of her partner and said that she had found her very religious and that she had found it very strange that she should have met her future boyfriend at church. She also suggested that she shouldn't be getting married so young (21). I asked Janette if she had asked her partner for more information about how church was organised in North Carolina or about her attitudes to marriage but she had not done so. In the discussion that developed it gradually emerged that church-going obviously meant something very different for her American partner than it did for the students here in northern Germany. I suggested that the fact that the American girl had met her future husband 'at church' revealed that church going had a much more social role in Southern US culture than it did here. Finally, I encouraged Janette to explain to her partner her surprise at getting married so young and to find out more about her attitudes to marriage. The following week she wrote the following message:

```
What about marriage? You said to me before that you get married next year,
we would consider it very young, since no one, I know, gets married so
young! Is it normal for you in the States? Or did you just find your dream-
boy?
```
E-mail Extract 4.9

The reply she receives begins to show Janette the alternative perspective which the American students had in relation to marriage:


```
I don't think its unusual that I'm planning on getting married next
December. I guess there are people who'll say that I'm too young, but I
don't think so. I'll be 22 and my boyfriend will be 25. This summer I was
in two of my friends wedding. One of my friends was 20 and the other was
21. I wouldn't say that there is a particular age that people get married
in the U.S. There is definitely a wide range. I think in the last
generation the age people get married has gone up as people spend more time
in school. I do hear a lot of girls talking and planning weddings for right
after they graduate.
```
E-mail Extract 4.10

This exchange is significant for the following reason. Firstly, Janette's initial reaction to her partner's mail had been to reject the cultural information and dismiss her behaviour as 'typically American' and over-religious – a reaction which I found to be typical of students during our discussions of the e-mails which they were receiving. (When this e-mail was discussed in class, many students had suggested writing back to the girl, citing divorce rates in order to 'show her' that marriage at such a young age was not advisable!) Unless Janette had been challenged by her teacher to look at the behaviour from a non-German cultural perspective, she would probably not have tried to find out more about the cultural context in which the information of her partner's mail was based. In other words, instead of trying to *analyse* the information and understand its significance from the point of view of someone from that culture, she would have simply chosen to *react* to the mail – by judging its content with her own cultural standards and principles. Instead, our in-class discussion seemed to have an effect on how she and others approached the analysis of mails. In a later interview, another student referred to this example and explained the following:

> "Somebody else in class wondered how she could have met her boyfriend in
> church, something that here in Germany probably would not happen any
> more, and I got to know that church in America is obviously something
> different than here (and that she therefore must not be a shy, traditional
> American girl). The point is that she simply has a culturally different

background to me, and this cultural background of hers might throw a different light on the other things she said."

The inability – or unwillingness – to look for alternative perspectives in the Americans' messages seems to be related to the students' attitudes to how cultures differ from each other. When asked in their end of term questionnaire if, during the exchange, they had noticed different values or different perspectives on behaviour between the cultures, many rejected the idea that the two cultures differed in such a way:

Bahareh:	No, I didn't notice anything.
Pia:	I see that there are many differences between the two cultures, but in general, both Germany and America are typical western nations.
Patricia:	It's difficult to say something about that in some sentences. But I think most people no matter if Americans, Germans or whatever have different values and perspectives than me because there are few people who are against capitalism.
Nadja:	I think that all western societies have a lot in common and that they are not as different as I thought before.
Laura:	Ich bin auf Gemeinsamen aufmerksam geworden (z.B. die Unsicherheit in Bezug auf die Zukunft, Bedeutung von Freundschaft / Liebe usw.)
Thorsten:	Ja, z. T. habe ich andere Werte gehabt oder habe sie noch als einige Amerikaner, aber es gibt auch Deutsche die eine andere Meinung haben als ich.
Anna:	Not at all. All people are very different from each other. Look at our English class. It also depends on cultures, but generally speaking it is already so.

Table 4.6 Noticing different values and perspectives – Extract 1

These comments seem to suggest a rejection of cultural difference on anything but a factual level. Learners suggest that "all people are different to each other", "all western societies have a lot in common" and that "es gibt auch Deutsche, die eine andere Meinung haben als ich". While such an approach to cultural difference is, perhaps, an attempt to move away from stereotypes or racism, it is not helpful in the long run for the development of intercultural communicative competence. As was seen in chapter one, Bennett (1993) warns against the limited nature of an understanding of culture where difference is recognised, but nevertheless minimised in order to highlight the 'universality' of human behaviour. Believing that 'deep down we all are the same' is, according to Bennet, not an adequate response to cultural difference. Although western cultures may have much in common at times, he sees this as not being relevant to the real issues of intercultural communication.

Other students, in their answers to the same question, appear to confirm my suggestion that learners are often unclear as to how to analyse cultural behaviour. In these examples, the students seemed to feel that there were such differences between the two cultures but were unable to identify them:

Frank	Yes, in a certain way but I do not know how to name them exactly.
Laura	Ja, aber das kann ich irgendwie noch nicht verallgemeinernd formulieren. (Schwierige Frage!)
Valerie	Yes, eating (quite essential to life) seems like a necessity whereas we seem to enjoy it more. I can't seem to explain it but that is a certain perspective on life for me which seems to be different to at least some Americans.
Wibke	Ja, ganz sicher. Es ist aber sehr schwierig, diese Werte zu benennen. Sie sind so abstrakt. Es hat sicher etwas mit Gemeinschaftlichkeit zu tun, aber gleichzeitig auch mit mehr Konkurrenz.

Table 4.7 Noticing different values and perspectives – Extract 2

Comments such as "but I do not know how to name them exactly", "I can't seem to explain it" and "Es ist aber sehr schwierig, diese Werte zu benennen" all signal that the students are having difficulty identifying the different perspectives or the values which underlie and shape these perspectives. Therefore, it becomes clear that if students are unwilling or unable to approach culture on anything but a superficial, factual level, then they will not be able to discover or interpret alternative values and perspectives – the skills which Byram describes. Instead, their interaction is likely to stay on a superficial, factual level where facts about behaviour and practices may be exchanged but their cultural significance in the different cultures will never be reflected on or identified. As Byram himself warns:

> "…to describe the behaviours, the artefacts, the institutions of a foreign culture is inadequate…It is necessary to give an account of the significance of behaviours, artefacts and institutions in terms of the culturally agreed meanings which they embody, of which they are realisations (1989: 84)."

Unfortunately, the essays which the German group wrote based on a comparison of their universities (task 3) were, for the most part, to reflect the superficial, descriptive understanding of cultural difference. A short extract from one essay reflects this approach perfectly:

> ### Comparing University Life in Clemson and Essen
> Is there a really big difference between a German and an American university, or German and American student life? Well, I wouldn't say that. There are certainly some differences, but my personal opinion is that students all over the world live a similar life. I asked my e-mail partner to tell me something about his university life and out of his account I could make some conclusions. I realized that the life in America doesn't really differ from German life, but nevertheless I found some distinctions.
>
> At first he told me something about the Clemson university. About 17,000 students attend the university. The buildings are "beautiful" and made out of bricks. The campus is not too big with lots of grass areas and trees. Well, what can I say about the university of Essen? Beautiful? Not at all! It's probably a little bit bigger than Clemson university. And the campus? There are also grass areas and trees but I don't know, I don't really like it. At Clemson they have a lot of bars there and they often make house parties. Do we have bars? Yes, we have the cafes but house parties? I've never even heard about that!…

Essay Extract 4.1

This essay extract is a far cry from the critical analysis and reflection on both the home and target cultures which many authors assume to be the result of intercultural e-mail exchanges. The student first of all rejects that cultural difference exists to a great extent on this level ("students all over the world live a similar life") and when she does point out differences, these are limited to differences in the number of grassy areas and bars which both universities have. The opportunity has been missed to find out and discuss the historical, political and social factors which were influential in the lay-out and design of the two campuses. Furthermore, the connection is never made between the on-campus facilities and the difference between the German concept of a "Pendler Universität" and the American concept of a university as being a home for students where pride in the institution is nurtured by on-campus activities and facilities.

It is important to point out that not all essays submitted by the German students took this unreflective, factual approach to the topic. Unlike the majority of essays submitted, Wibke's work (essay extract 4.2 below) shows an effective attempt to go beyond superficial facts and to identify the underlying values and attitudes of the target culture and then to use this insight to look more critically at her own culture. In this section of the essay, the student can be seen to be engaging in a process of reflection on the target culture and questioning of the home culture:

"University Life in America and in Germany. A Comparison

University life does not mean the same in the United States and in Germany. Apart from simple everyday life on the campus, the values and attitudes that dominate this life are different.

Most of the following differences can be associated with the headword *community*. Community is an important aspect for many parts of university life in America; much more than in Germany. A lot of students at American universities are members of sororities and fraternities or other students' clubs. The membership lasts for the whole life. Students spend a big part of their freetime together with the other members of their "house", how these unions are called sometimes, because they have an own "club house" which might even be the place where all of the members live during their studies. Homework, activities of social engagement, parties and sports can be organized by the union; unlike in Germany. Over here, most of the freetime is spent outside of the campus, apart from the university and only by chance with other students. Fraternities at German universities have become rare in the meantime. Those still existing few are suspected (or convicted) of being neo-fascistic. They cannot be compared to fraternities at American universities in general.

In the USA, sports is not only part of the students` freetime, it also has a grand meaning for the whole university. Almost every university in America is famous for at least one discipline. Matches and contests with other schools are big events, most of the students support their team and are quite proud of it. Even after they left the university, some still pursue the results of their teams.

Students` clubs, a life-lasting relationship between student and university, the great meaning of university sports and the large number of freetime activities offered by the university are all a kind of expression of a phenomenon called *school spirit*. We do not have anything like that at most of the German universities or schools. American students are more connected to their university than German students.

Another difference concerning students' attitudes was not clearly said in the e-mails I received, but more or less written between the lines. Education seems to be valued differently in America. It is not so much a fundamental right like in Germany, but more a privilege. It is not easy to decide, which view appreciates education more: the one that makes it a right for everyone on the one hand and gives it the low status of being a matter of course on the other hand, or the view that makes education seem rare and precious, but excludes so many from it...

Comparing university life in these two countries, a lot more differences could surely be found. Just so, numerous similarities would be found. Being a student in America does not mean exactly the same as being a student in Germany. Nevertheless, it cannot be totally different."

Essay Extract 4.2

Wibke's essay, and the analysis and reflection which she engaged in to create it, reveal the potential of such networked exchange activities for developing ICC. She has

developed her critical cultural awareness by identifying the values which underlie her American partner's behaviour and has used this insight to take an objective view of her own culture as well. It is worth looking in more detail at how she achieved this. Firstly, it is clear from the content of the essay that she and her partner have exchanged information about different institutions in their countries (for example, university fraternities) and how these are perceived in both countries, thereby developing her understanding of the target culture's products and practices. Secondly, comments such as "the values and attitudes that dominate this life are different" and her suggestion that she had found attitudes which were "not clearly said in the e-mails I received, but more or less written between the lines" demonstrate how she has identified and analysed the concepts and values which lie beneath American student behaviour. Finally, her discussion near the end of her essay on whether the German or American approaches to education was superior shows a willingness on the part of the learner to "…question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment (Byram, 1997a: 50)".

Upon receiving her essay, I contacted Wibke by e-mail to try and find out how she had approached the task. Curiously, her answers revealed, first of all, the common way in which the e-mails from America were being evaluated by other students in the class:

```
I found it very difficult to write something not too banal about it.
When we talked about the differences between the universities and the
students in class it was mostly like: Americans have "no culture"
(what the **** does that mean?) or are too patriotic or they are
superficial or any of these "stereotype stereotypes". It was really
getting on my nerves and I didn't want to write an essay about it.
That's why I wrote it that late, just because I had to.
```
E-mail Extract 4.11

She then went on to describe her approach to the task and the problems she had encountered when evaluating the e-mail materials. Even though her attempt at cross-cultural analysis can be considered quite successful, her comments, like the feedback from the other students, underline the need learners have for guidance in understanding their correspondence:

```
The differences didn't  strike me when I read the e-mails. I had to
think about it for a few days and collect many little differences.
Yes, I found it difficult to find them because I found it difficult to
name them. I had to read the e-mails again and make notes of all the
tiny things that seemed to be different in Germany. Later, I saw that
a lot of them were about community; it was not explicitly said in the
e-mails.

As I said in the essay, the thing about how education is valued was
only written between the lines. In one of the first e-mails, there was
one sentence like: "It is funny what you write about the chaos at your
university, but don't you think it is great to get such education?"
That's not the words she used, it's just what I read from it. And I
thought: Oh, oh! She thinks I don't respect the university and the
education  properly.  There  were  other  sentences  that  might  mean
something similar, but it was not said explicitly.

The interesting thing about this activity is that you're forced to
look at your own culture and everyday life from another point of view.
Boring or usual things become special. I liked that.
```
E-mail Extract 4.12

Her comments illustrate the challenge for learners of using their critical cultural awareness to look beyond the facts and figures which the international partner supplies and to identify the implicit values which they reflect ("I found it difficult to find them because I found it difficult to name them") but it also becomes clear that such work can be rewarding and enlightening for the learner as one is "…forced to look at your own culture and everyday life from another point of view". Of course, the question remains how foreign language classes and e-mail exchanges can be structured and guided by the teacher in order to bring more students to 'read between the lines' and undergo the same process of reflection and discovery as Wibke.

Other studies on intercultural competence have found results similar to those reported here. Woodin (2001), in her case study on the intercultural learning in a face-to-face Tandem course, also found that learners found it difficult to engage in a process of intercultural analysis similar to that which is required by Byram's model.

> "It appears that students are interested in their partners' culture coupled with a desire to know more, but students do not seem to take the further step of a deeper analysis, such as questioning attitudes or drawing conclusions from information. It may be that in order to achieve these, students will require further support from their tutor." (Woodin, 2001: 199)

It is interesting here that, not only did Woodin find the same limitations in her students' intercultural competence, but that she also comes to the conclusion that an increased role for the teacher or tutor may be the key to addressing this problem.

Taking into account my students' limited definition of cultural difference and their need for support in developing the necessary skills of discovery and analysis, I was to adapt the remaining part of the course in the following way. Firstly, the German group's second intercultural exchange (January to February 2002) involved specific analysis in class (as well as on-line) of different cultural interpretations of words and concepts (tasks five and six). Secondly, texts on the theory of intercultural communication (Scollon and Scollon, 1994) were read and discussed in class. Finally, students were required to complete learner diaries in which they reflected on what they were learning from their on-line interaction and how they felt it could be improved.

The effects of these measures, in particular the on-line activities taken up with the class from the University of Michigan (tasks five and six), will be examined in the following section.

4.5 Developing ICC in the Classroom: Integrating the Michigan Exchange

By the time the e-mail exchange between the classes at Essen and Clemson universities had come to an end in mid-December 2001, my on-going analysis of the students' e-mails, essays and feedback forms had made two points quite clear. Firstly, it was clear that learners were enjoying this approach to language/culture learning and they also felt that they were benefiting from the on-line contact. In response to the question whether they felt the e-mail exchange had helped them to improve their English language skills, 13 out of 19 students had chosen the categories "Agree" or "Agree strongly" (see fig. 4.2 below). In the same questionnaire, students mentioned that they had learned new vocabulary and expressions (Ana-Marija, Olga, Janette and Frank), that the exchange had helped them to develop more fluency in their writing (Bahareh, Sebastian, Laura and Wibke) and that they felt it had given them an opportunity to use 'authentic' language as opposed to what one student referred to as 'school English' (Pia, Olga, Nadja and Thorsten).
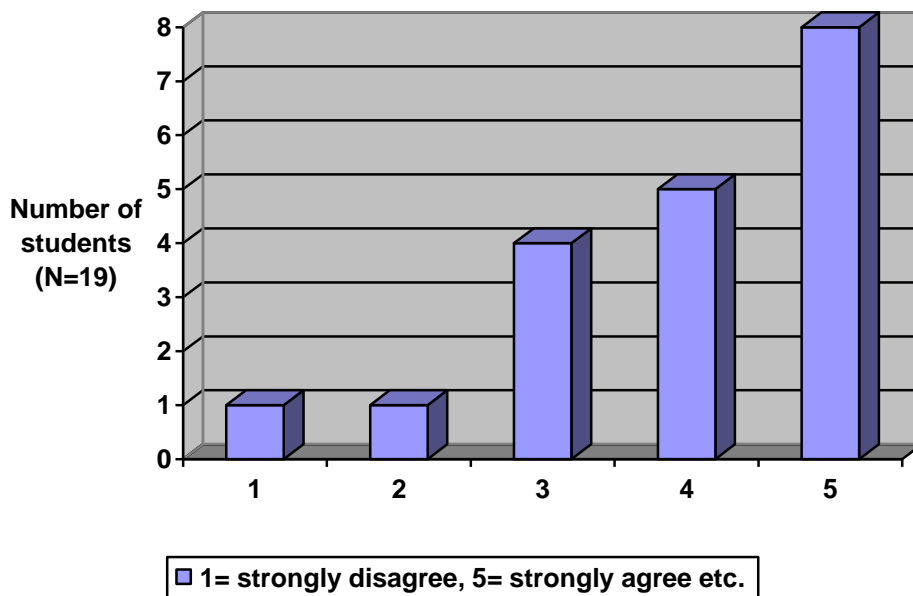
Fig. 4.2 The e-mail exchange helped me to improve my English language skills.

The second issue which my mid-term research revealed was that (as was seen in section 4.4.5) students were in need of greater assistance in developing critical cultural awareness and the skills of interpreting and relating – elements which are vital to ICC. Interestingly, in the discussion of his model, Byram (1997a: 67) suggests that the

classroom is not only ideally suited for the structured presentation of knowledge, but also for the development of the skills of interpreting and relating. He argues that this is the case because, firstly, the learners have an opportunity in the classroom to work on the skills without the time pressure which is usually inherent in situations of intercultural contact. In other words, students are able to discuss and 'try out' more than just one interpretation of a cultural document or event in the security of their classes. Secondly, in the classroom, learners are not obliged to work on these skills independently. Instead, they can benefit from the guidance of the teacher in their attempts to develop these skills.

I hoped that our work with the class of German language learners at the University of Michigan would serve as one possible activity for working on these skills and critical cultural awareness. As was explained earlier in section 4.2, our short exchange from January 18th until February 17th 2002 was to be based on a *Cultura* style on-line questionnaire and discussion forum. As this type of activity involves a great deal of 'in-class' discussion and analysis, I imagined that this would give me an opportunity to play a greater role in helping students analyse and interpret the input they would receive from the foreign culture. Our main problem was that we would only have three contact classes to work through the juxtaposed questionnaire results and discuss our results on the forum with the American group. To facilitate this class-time as much as possible, the English department's on-line computer centre was reserved for those three weeks.

The key words which the students were asked to write their associations on were the following:

The body/ The colour blue/ Eating out/ Friday night/ The future/ Happiness/ History/ Individualism/ Military service/ Nationality/ September 11th / Vacations.

My partner teacher, Kalli, and I had chosen these terms for various reasons. Some expressions, such as "eating out" and "Friday night" were seen as being accessible and interesting for young university students, while others, including "history", "nationality" and "military service" were chosen due to interesting differences which we imagined would exist between American and German attitudes. (The ten completed juxtaposed questionnaires have been compiled in the accompanying CD Rom.)

In the week from the 18 until the 26 January students in both classes were given the URL of the on-line questionnaire and asked to complete it in their mother tongue. The results were then compiled by the technical staff at the University of Michigan and placed on-line on the 28 January. On this day, the Michigan students had their first contact class (in a computer laboratory) based on the exchange. During this class they posted their introductory mails to the discussion forum we had set up which involved a brief self-introduction and an account of what they expected to be doing in five years time. Shortly afterwards, the Essen students posted their own self-introductions and responded to one of the Michigan postings.

When the German group had finished these postings in class, I then distributed print-outs of the first six juxtaposed lists from the questionnaires. I had explained in a previous class how the activity was meant to work but had expected that the group would nevertheless find it difficult to go about analysing such a new form of cultural data. (As is the case, for example, with concordancing data, students often need guidance at the beginning in learning how to approach the format of the material.) For this reason I then went through a preliminary analysis of one of the lists ("Friday Night") with the class. (The list is reproduced below in table 4.8.) The students' initial reaction was to say that the lists were very similar (both sets of students, for example, seemed to go out a lot on the weekends) and therefore there were few conclusions that could be drawn about intercultural differences. However, I asked the students to look at where each group of students went on Friday night. The American group referred persistently to "party" (nine times), while the Germans spoke not only of parties, but also about "Kneipe" (three times) "Disco" (3 times) and "ausgehen" (1 time). The question, I suggested to the class, was why the Americans only spoke about parties and not about bars and discos. They soon came to the conclusion that the Americans could not go to bars or discos as they were not yet 21 years old. This, I explained, was only one small example of how the lists reflected cultural difference between the two countries.

Friday night	Freitag nacht
• music, theater, enjoyment • drinking, party, vacation • party, dancing, beer • parties, fun, drinking • end of the week, movies, free time • party, relax, no homework • relaxing, celebration, fun • relief, calm, blue • drinking, dancing, music • party, friends, drinking • party, friends, relaxing • beer, dance, party • party, drunk people, no classes • drunk, coffee, relaxed • time to rest, catching up with friends, party • another show, rituals, TV	• tiefer Schlaf, ein seltsamer Traum, dreizehn • Kneipe, Hefeteilchen (=Pils), Freunde • dunkel, lang, gut • rotwein, tanzen, laute musik • spass kino trinken • Party, Fete, Spaß • Ausgehen, Musik, Spass • Wochenende Party schlafen • Endlich Wochenende Disco • Freunde treffen • ausschlafen, entspannen, party • Party Nachtbus müde • Kneipe feiern Spaß haben • Disco, Freunde, Sekt • dunkel wach sein schlafen • Kneipe, Kino, Disco

Table 4.8: Essen – Michigan Exchange. Word Association Lists for 'Friday Night'

For homework that week, I asked the German class to continue their analysis of the first six lists and then to enter the web-forum before their next class and post some comments and questions for their partner class based on their investigations. The Michigan class was expected to do the same. However, the calendar of postings reveals that none of the Essen students posted to the forum before their next class on 7 February. Subsequent feedback revealed that this was due to two main reasons. Firstly, students complained that gaining entry to the discussion forum was complicated and confusing. Although I had supplied a hand-out with graphics which illustrated how students should log-in and access the forums, this appeared to have been insufficient. The complex URL of the platform, the need for usernames and passwords and the many superfluous options on the platform seemed to have put students off and made the process appear more complicated that it actually was. The lesson to be learned from this

may be that simplicity should be the key to platform design and access in such on-line exchanges.

The second reason for their lack of participation was that the exchange was now taking place in the last remaining weeks of the term and students found the activity very time consuming and conflicted with their obligatory essays and projects for other courses. The Michigan group, on the other hand, were at the beginning of their term and students seemed to have no trouble accessing the forum and posting their messages. The clash of institutional timetables in German-American networked exchanges has already been looked at in detail by Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003) and their findings about these difficulties would seem to be confirmed in this example. In several e-mails around this time, Kalli expressed his frustration that the German group was not supplying a sufficient number of contributions to the board but I felt powerless to 'oblige' students to participate any more than they were already doing at this busy time of the year.

In our class on 7 February, the students continued their analysis on the lists and focussed in particular on the topic "The body". After first working in pairs on the list, I organised a class discussion where groups of students suggested their analysis of the differences and similarities between the German and American responses. When some general ideas had been discussed, the students were asked to create mind-maps which represented the key trends which they had discovered in the lists . (An example of their work which was created made use of mind-mapping software in our computer laboratory can be seen in fig. 4.3 below). They then went on-line to the discussion forum and posted their suggestions on this and some of the other lists. Over the following week many of the American students responded to their postings on 'the body' and a rich and revealing intercultural dialogue developed (see appendix 1 for a transcript of the dialogues from this exchange). The original developers of the *Cultura* activity suggest that the on-line forum in the activity serves various functions including asking for clarification, explaining understanding to others, helping to debunk common myths and linking the topic to related social issues (Fürstenberg *et. al.*, 2001: 67). The on-line discussion carried out here on this topic reveals examples of all these functions as well as others.
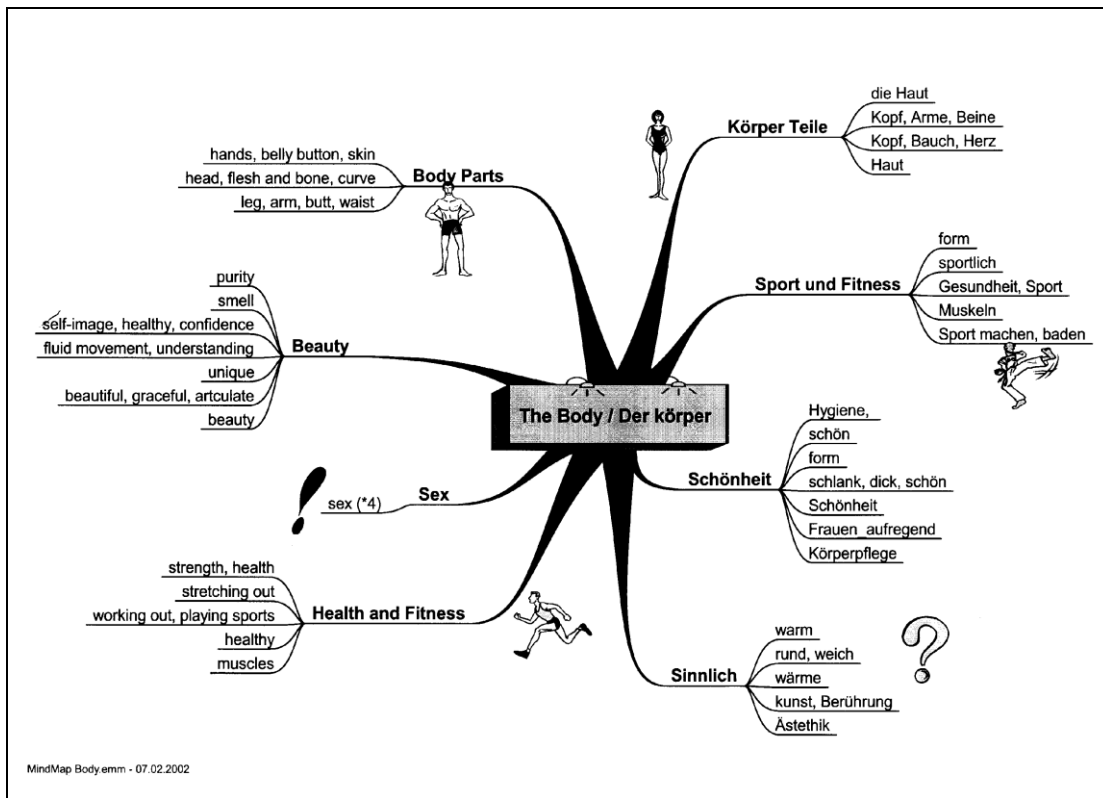
Fig. 4.3 Sample student mindmap based on a Cultura questionnaire

At an early stage of the exchange, one of the American students posted the following message:

> Do you think that American's are fixated with the physical appearance of the body and their sexuality, or is it that German's are afraid of the body?? Personally I feel that American's are more afraid of accepting the body and therefore have to sexualise it, where as Germans for instance are much more comfortable with nudity than Americans are.

Forum Posting Extract 4.1

Here, the student can be seen to look for clarification ("that German's are afraid of the body??") and to check her own hypothesis by opening the belief up for debate ("I feel that …Germans for instance are much more comfortable with nudity then Americans are"). In the following exchange between Eva (from Michigan) and Valerie (from Essen), the American student appears to use the activity to check her hypothesis and test one of the stereotypical images which she has of Germany:

> Americans, especially students, are often comfortable discussing sex and the body. This level of comfort comes through in the survey results, as Americans often mentioned body parts that are more "private" (belly buttons and the butt) and directly mentioned sex. Is it true that Germans are not as comfortable with the body or am I just trying too hard to draw conclusions from the survey results? I believe that there is a high level of openness in the US, but I am not sure about Germany. If stereo-types are true though, then Germans are shy about their sexuality.

Forum Posting Extract 4.2

Her final comment "If stereo-types are true though, then Germans are shy about their sexuality" definitely sounds like a challenge to her German partners to provide proof that the stereotype is not justified. Valerie's response goes about doing exactly that:

I don't think that Germans are shy about their sexuality. There are actually quite a few words that talk about sex, but in a more sensual way than the word "sex" does. for example "warm" (you can only feel that the body is warm when you are close to somebody else's body), "weich" (same deal) , "Berührung" (very obviously sexually, but sort of loving). To me, the word "sex" has a rather cold meaning, not as loving, if that makes sense. It would be interesting to know how you feel about that word and in which context you'd use it.

Forum Posting Extract 4.3

Here, Valerie uses an alternative interpretation of the lists to reject this particular stereotype of Germans in America. She suggests that the German group had indeed referred to sex in their list, but they had done this "in a more sensual way than the word "sex" does…"

In several stages during the exchange it is obvious that students are using the forum to reflect on their own culture and explore how they are seen by other cultures. The initial interaction about the topic of 'the body' can be seen to slowly develop into a reflection on how sex is approached in both societies. Emily, for example, asks her German counterparts "Do you think that American's are obsessed with the body and sex??", while Sonali wonders "Vielleicht weil Sex in Amerika so ein Tabu ist, ist es hier immer in den Gedanken." These are examples of on-line interaction which is moving from a mere exchange of information to a genuine dialogue which involves engaging directly with one's partners and being open to alternative interpretations. The activity of analysing the questionnaires for cultural values and beliefs and then comparing one's analysis with members of the target culture seems to have helped the German students achieve a level of interaction which was more productive for intercultural learning than their previous e-mail exchange.

The following week in our class (our final class together), I reflected with the German students on the on-line discussion which had taken place on this and other topics. In order to facilitate the discussion I made a print-out of some of the most thought-provoking comments from the message board and these were read and then

discussed in detail. Following that, the students posted some further comments on the first six topics to the discussion forum.

The feedback which I received at the end of the course would seem to have justified this approach. Fürstenberg et. al. suggest that: "What makes them [the questionnaires activity] so potent is that they give students a concrete basis for comparison" (2001: 62). This was immediately confirmed in our own work. In a questionnaire about the activity, the German group reported that they had found it a very useful approach for learning about other cultures (see fig. 4.4). The students had, according to Nadja, "talked about certain topics and not only about some general issues. It was more precise and we could respond immediately and directly". Wibke also explained that they had "got a closer look on to the topics we discussed" and Anne described it as "eine sehr kompakte Form des Lernens und der Informationsvermittlung ".
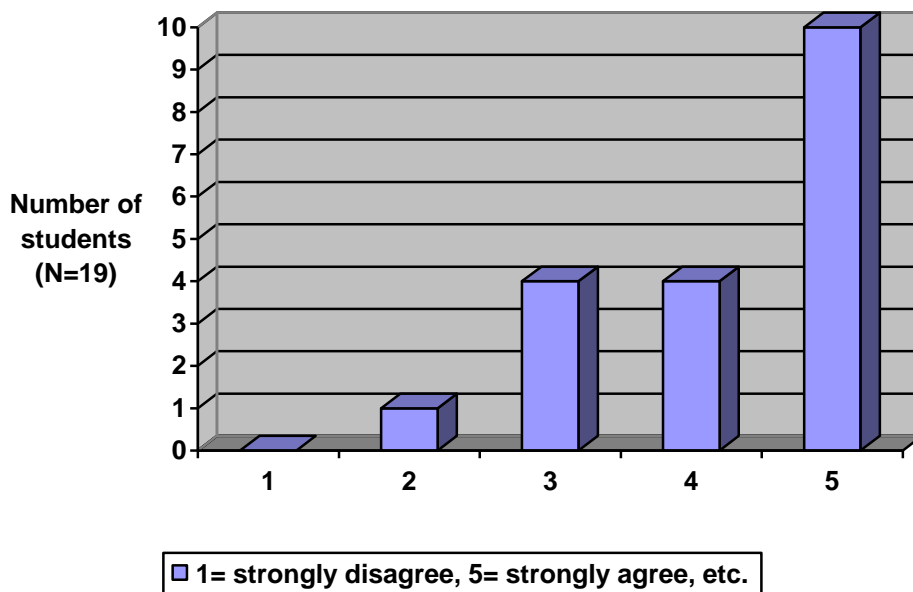
Fig. 4.4 I found the Cultura exchange good for learning about another culture.

The feedback forms also highlighted that the activity had, to a great extent, achieved my aim of increasing the learners' awareness as to how cultures differ not only on a factual level, but also on a conceptual level and how different or strange cultural behaviour can be explained through a better understanding of the underlying beliefs, values and associations which each culture attributes to this behaviour. Becoming aware that such differences exist is part of Byram's critical cultural awareness, while being

able to identify such differences are the skills of interpreting and relating. Students demonstrated that they had developed such skills and awareness when they explained that "sometimes we are literally talking about the same thing but mean a different one (Frank)" and the activity was very good "for getting to know their other way of thinking and what they actually mean when they say something like 'let's go out for dinner' (Valerie)". Others commented that the activity was well suited for culture learning because "you were able to understand where those differences come from (Volker)" and the investigations revealed "wie andere Kulturen über etwas denken (Thorsten)". These types of comments had been missing from the earlier feedback on the e-mail exchange and suggest that intensive negotiation of meaning as opposed to the unreflective exchange of information, as well as a substantial degree of teacher-guided reflection on materials from partner classes can contribute to the development of ICC.

4.6 The Role of the Teacher in On-line Intercultural Exchanges

The period of time I spent working on the exchange with the students in our contact classes served to dismiss any suggestion that networked activities will allow the teacher to take on the role of a 'facilitator of learning' or 'guide on the side' who will simply work quietly in the background to organise the exchange, manage technicalities and help out in the case of problems. The need to help learners develop their skills and cultural awareness so that they could benefit from the activity meant that I had to take on many more teacher roles than those that are often suggested in the literature.

Although in our *Cultura* exchange with Michigan the cultural material may have been located in the on-line platform and the interaction with the foreign culture may have taken place in the on-line forums, the major part of reflection, analysis and discussion took place in the classroom. Similar to Feldman et. al.'s (2000) model of reflective discourse which was described earlier in chapter two (section 2.4.1), my role as teacher involved encouraging students to develop their own theories about what the information in the Michigan word lists actually signified and how the lists of word associations from Michigan and Essen differed from each other. This sometimes involved engaging students in discussions with each other in group work or as a class, depending on the requirements of the activity. However, at times, it also involved teacher-centred activities such as presenting cultural information which the students did not have already as well as actually modelling how a list could be analysed or how a posting on the forum could be answered without causing offence or sounding too abrupt or aggressive. Kern suggests that the role of the teacher in intercultural exchanges is the following:

> "The teacher's crucial task is to lead follow-up discussions, so that the chains of texts that students produce can be examined, interpreted, and possibly re-interpreted in the light of class discussion or subsequent responses from native speakers." (2000: 234)

I would suggest that while this is true, Kern's assertion does not go far enough. Teachers need to lead classroom discussions, but they also need to explicitly develop learners' knowledge and skills and cultural awareness by providing factual information, by modelling the analysis of texts from the partner class, by helping learners to create

their own correspondence and also by encouraging them to focus on the meanings which the target culture attributes to behaviour as opposed to simply focussing on the behaviour itself. These, I would argue, are all teacher-centred or teacher-led activities which have a justifiable presence in the network-based foreign language classroom.

This highlights an important but often neglected point about NBLT and classroom-based language learning in general – that it is neither appropriate nor helpful to radically contrast teacher and student centred approaches. In this case, for example, students were only able to benefit from their 'student-centred' on-line interaction when they were trained and prepared by 'teacher-led' in-class activities. Legutke (2001) has the following to say about this point:

> "juxtaposing learner-centeredness to teacher-centeredness, learner autonomy to teacher direction is too simple. …[I]n the language classroom's expanded space for action, openness and teacher direction co-exist, just as forms of cooperative learning are compatible with phases of conventional knowledge transmission. Redesigning the language classroom is not an all-or-nothing concept, where everything is new and the old is dismissed." (2001: 49)

In the case of the network-based classroom, it would appear that learners stand to benefit most from learner-centred activities and interaction with international partners only when they are trained by their teacher in their own classroom how to engage appropriately with their partners, how to elicit information from them and then how to analyse that information.

The following section will consider how the social and cultural context in which the exchanges took place influenced the project's success and the development of ICC.

4.7 Discussion: Influence of the Socio-cultural Context

In her research on another e-mail exchange between German and American university students, Belz (2001, 2002) underlines the importance of identifying how the macro features of context and setting can effect the development of intercultural learning in networked exchanges. Other recent work in this area would also appear to demonstrate the growing importance attributed to the socio-cultural context in researching and understanding on-line intercultural exchanges (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002, Müller-Hartmann, 2001 and Warschauer, 1999). These factors became clear during this study as well in the issues of time deadlines and number of postings during the web-based exchange with the Michigan group. Different semester schedules and institutional demands on the two groups of students meant that both groups did not contribute to the exchange to the same extent. Furthermore, data collected during the Essen-Clemson exchange also reveals how the cultural and institutional contexts within which the exchange took place served to influence the learning outcomes and the project's contribution to developing intercultural competence. In particular, it was noted how different cultural approaches to e-mail and internet use helped to shape the dynamic of the intercultural relationships. Ironically, the technology which we were using to bring students together (and one of the symbols of the 'global village') was being exploited in very different ways in the two cultural contexts and this was influencing the outcome of the exchange.

When our exchange began in October 2001, the USA was the leading western user both of computers and of the internet. Statistics at the time showed that the USA had the largest number of PCs-in-use in the world (175 million) (Computer Industry Almanac, 2002) and that it was the top country for internet use, with over 114 million Americans going on-line on a weekly basis (Computer Industry Almanac, 2001). These statistics seemed to reflect American students' approaches to the new technologies. Kramsch and Thorne describe American students' attitudes to the internet in the following way:

> "For most American students, an ever-expanding proportion of their lives is mediated by communication and information technologies. CMC has become a habituated and everyday dimension of social, academic, and professional communicative activity." (2002: 87)

In contrast, statistical research on Germany and discussion with my class in Essen in particular showed that, although German society was eagerly taking up the opportunities which the Internet was offering, my class would not be coming to the e-mail exchange with the same assumptions and attitudes to working on-line. In 2001, the Computer Industry Almanac had reported that Germany was the third-highest user of the Internet in the world (after the USA and Japan), with almost 15 million users each week. Other research reflected the positive attitude that existed at the time in Germany towards the use of the Internet for education by suggesting that over 71% of Germans believed that children should be using the Internet to help them with homework and to communicate with friends and family (Intel, 2000). However, these positive attitudes were not translating directly into availability and access. Although in the autumn of 2001 the German education minister Edelgard Buhlman was able to announce that every German school now had access to the Internet, the reality was that in German schools there was only an average of one computer connected to the Internet for every 40 pupils (Der Spiegel, 2002).

Data from the University of Essen reflects the rise in use of the internet, but also reveals the lack of facilities to cater for the increased use. The number of students using the free university e-mail service rose from 1,000 in 1997 to over 4,000 in 2001 (Das HeRZ Blatt, 2001) and this does not take into account the thousands of students who were using free, on-line e-mail services. However, statistics from the university and student feedback at the time revealed that there was a serious lack of on-line computers at the university which could be used for reading e-mails or surfing the Internet. In total, less that 250 computers were available to the 25,000 students enrolled at the university at the time. A short questionnaire on computer access completed by my students at the start of our course together (see table 4.9 below) showed that, although the majority used the Internet regularly and were comfortable working with on-line technologies, many (12 out of 19) did not have access to the Internet at home and were therefore relying on the facilities at the university in the library, Rechnenzentrum, and our department's computer centre. Many complained that these facilities were not sufficient and that they often had long waits before being able to go on-line. The problem is reflected in this extract from one of Julia's mails to her partner during the exchange:

> I apologise for the delayed response, but I do it really as soon as possible. Unfortunately, we have no possibility to access the computers at the weekend – our computer centre is closed.

E-mail Extract 4.13

As a result of this difficulty of access to on-line computers, the Germans reported varied regularity in using e-mail. Only eight students reported going on-line every day, while three said they did so every second day and eight others said that they usually only used the Internet once a week. The students did not particularly see this as a problem but rather as all that could be expected in the circumstances. This contrasted starkly with the e-mails and the feedbacks from the Clemson group which included claims that they looked at their e-mail twice a day or that "we check our e-mail every chance we get".

Have you ever used the Internet / e-mail before?

Yes: 17 No: 2

If yes, what did you use it for?
[Multiple answers possible] Contact distant friends (2), Research (7), On-line gaming (2), e-mail friends (10), surfing (7)

Do you have a computer with Internet connection at home?
Yes: 7, No: 12

If not, where do you go to access e-mail etc?
[Multiple answers possible] Library: 5, Rechnenzentrum: 7, Selbstlernzentrum 4

Do you have an e-mail account?
Yes: 13, No:6

Do you find using e-mail and the Internet difficult?
No: 17, Yes:2

Have you ever used new technologies in your classes before?
No: 16, Yes: 3 (Computer Science:1, English:2)

How often do you access the Internet / e-mail?
Almost every day: 8, Every 2nd day: 3, Once a week: 8

Table 4.9 Questionnaire on Internet Use (Essen Group, October 2001)

This contrast in on-line behaviour was quickly noticed by the American group. Many of them reported that the biggest cultural learning aspect of the exchange had been the length of time which German partners had taken to respond. One of the

American students later commented to me in an e-mail that "how they don't email everyday, we thought that was kinda weird". Their teacher, Nancy Jackson, also mentioned to me in her correspondence that the topic was coming up continuously when the e-mails were discussed in her classes. Obviously, the American group were shocked that a cultural practice which they had taken for granted, in this case regular e-mail correspondence, was not being reciprocated by their German partners. The American feedback forms which they returned to me at the end of the exchange revealed genuine bewilderment as to this difference in behaviour and many speculated as to why the German group had behaved in such a way. Anna's partner Jamilia appeared to recognise the difficulty which Germans had to access the Internet when she suggested that "I probably could email Anna everyday, but it was harder for her to email me" whereas Sarah put the lack of regular contact down to her partner's other academic assignments: "the German students were so busy and did not get to reply quickly". Interestingly, Nadja's partner Kristine seems to have imagined that the slow pace of e-mail exchange was due to a cultural norm in Germany: "I thought it would be best to not be too pushy because I did not want to offend any of the students, I thought it would be best if I let Nadja determine the pace of our emails".

While the difficulty gaining access to computers was undoubtedly one factor for the German students not writing more often, another factor appeared to be the differing cultural approaches as to how e-mail correspondence should function. In general, the Americans generally wrote much shorter e-mails than the German counterparts, used what they considered to be a friendly and informal register and regularly mentioned aspects of their private lives in their mails within the early stages of the project. In the majority of the nine exchange partnerships which were analysed for number of e-mails and number of words written (table 4.10 below), the American students wrote on average 133 words fewer words per e-mail than their German partners. This is quite significant as all the exchange took place in English and the Americans had, reportedly, easier access to Internet facilities. (The other partnerships could not be analysed as I did not receive all their e-mail correspondence.)

As the Americans had been surprised by the lack of regular mails from their partners in Essen, the German group also reported being surprised by the quick replies they received from Clemson and the willingness on behalf of the Americans to talk

about personal issues. Iryna commented that "My American partner always answered straight away and she used to tell me things that you would tell a friend – and not an email acquaintance" while Olga reported that "Was mich erstaunt hat ist dass die Amerikaner schon in der ersten email über ihre Freunde (ich meine Braut, Liebhaber) erzählen. Normalerweise berichtet man darüber viel später, wenn man einander schon besser kennenlernt."

Name	Number of words written	Number of e-mails written	Average number of words per mail
Nadja (Germany)	6,244	10	624
Kristin (USA)	2,592	8	324
Ipcevit (Germany)	5,685	9	631
Mike (USA)	5,211	11	473
Valerie (Germany)	3,804	8	475
Sarah (USA)	1,612	8	201
Wibke (Germany)	2,066	8	258
Greer (USA)	4,090	10	409
Thorsten (Germany)	4,329	8	541
Mary (USA)	3,054	9	339
Frank (Germany)	6,360	13	489
Carrie (USA)	1,737	11	157
Sebastian (Germany)	6,388	11	580
Jenny (USA)	4,342	10	434
Julia (Germany)	3,412	8	427
Kevin (USA)	4,614	8	576
Patricia (Germany)	3,878	9	430
Alison (USA)	2,765	8	345

German Average Number of Words: 495

American Average Number of Words: 362

Table 4.10: E-mail statistics: 9 partnerships Essen-Clemson

The German group, in contrast to their American counterparts, tended to take longer to reply but when they did write, the German mails took on a much longer form in which they focussed mainly on the task at hand. Their own private lives were only mentioned when this served to provide examples for the topic in question (e.g. university life). At the end of the exchange the large majority of the German students rejected the idea that they had developed a good friendship with their partner and described their partnerships as "more a 'business' relationship …although my partners seemed very friendly". Others reported being disappointed that, despite their friendly and warm style of writing, their American colleagues had ended their correspondence once the e-mail exchange had come to an end: "I was surprised that she doesn't write to me anymore. The messages were always open and friendly".

What becomes clear from this data is that institutional and cultural factors had led to the creation of two culturally different approaches to the use of an e-mail exchange in an educational context and these had, to a certain extent, clashed in this project. The American students had expected to send and receive short, regular and personal e-mails, while the German group had treated the exchange as an opportunity to write long e-mails based on their tasks on a weekly basis, thereby practising their English and completing the course requirements. While the Germans mails were polite and friendly, they were principally task-focussed and the Germans generally did not seek to 'bond' with their partners on anything more than on a polite level. Being faced with such alternate approaches to their work and communication practices was probably the biggest challenge to the students' intercultural competence in the whole project even though it did not appear anywhere as a task or activity.

It is important to point out that this should not be seen as a cultural generalisation which suggests that all American and German students can be expected to interact in these ways. In is interesting to note that Belz (2002) reports that the German students involved in another German-American exchange had actually reported the opposite to these findings. In that case, the Germans had complained that the US students were not sharing enough personal information and that the Americans were too focussed on task completion and not on topic discussion (in other words, the opposite of the findings here). These different findings can almost definitely be explained by referring to the

institutional context in which both exchanges were located. In the Belz project, the American students were using the foreign language to write their mails and they were strongly focussed on improving their German by successfully completing the assigned tasks. The Germans, on the other hand, were hoping to find out more about America and their partners through general interaction. In the Essen-Clemson exchange, it was the German group which was more task-focussed due to lack of on-line time for relationship building and a desire to complete the tasks and thereby improve their English through the exchange.

In conclusion, the data here would confirm Belz's (2002) proposal that students should be made aware of these institutional and cultural differences so that they do not become an insurmountable barrier to intercultural communication and the development of ICC in e-mail exchanges. This can best be achieved if the teachers involved in the project provide each other with relevant background information about, for example, students' workloads and the ease of access to Internet facilities in the different universities. Nevertheless, I would suggest that these differences should not be seen as problems but simply as part of the reality of intercultural communication and, as such, they give students an opportunity in developing their intercultural competence not simply through teacher-created activities, but also through dealing with the realities of their and their partners' worlds.

4.8 Conclusion

The research reported in this chapter looked at a networked intercultural exchange between a class of EFL learners at the University of Essen and two sets of American students over the duration of one academic semester. The study's aim was to begin the process of identifying to what extent NBLT (in this case, on-line intercultural exchanges) supports the development of language learners' intercultural communicative competence. The general conclusion, that intercultural exchanges can make an important contribution to the development of ICC, must be accompanied by a significant caveat: While the German students in this class did develop aspects of ICC, the level of success of the project was influenced by factors such as the students' ability to interact with their partners and to analyse the 'data' which they received from the target culture. Other factors including the role of the teacher in training students in how to engage in on-line exchanges as well as the socio-cultural context in which the exchange was taking place also influenced the success of the intercultural learning. The main findings will be now be reviewed briefly.

The first main finding of this study is that the cultural information exchanged in virtual projects is often of a subjective nature and allows students to learn how a culture's products and practices are experienced on a personal level. Learners in the target culture cannot be expected to be experts on the history, facts and statistical data of their own country. However, while students may not learn reliable, factual information about the target culture, they will learn how certain aspects of the target culture's products and practices are *perceived* by members of that culture. Networked exchanges should therefore not be seen as a replacement, but rather as a supplement, for the traditional factual information which is presented to language learners in textbooks and through work on authentic media resources.

Secondly, achieving a "change in perspective" as well as a greater awareness of how one's own culture is seen by others should not be seen as automatic consequences of e-mail exchanges. In the first part of this exchange (i.e. the e-mail project with Clemson), some students did show signs of having developed attitudes of curiosity towards the target culture and openness to alternative perspectives on their own culture, but many others found this difficult to achieve due to the relatively short duration of the project and due to the lack of activities which engaged them in intense dialogue and the

negotiation of meaning. The second part of the exchange (the *Cultura* exchange with Michigan) brought about a more intense dialogue on the issues in question as opposed to an unreflective exchange of information, and this provided learners with a better insight into the values and principles of their American partners and also encouraged them to reflect more on their own cultural values. Future projects should take these findings into account when considering issues of task design and scheduling.

A third important finding of this study was that students are not 'naturally' aware of how to engage successfully in an intercultural e-mail exchange. Essentially, they appear to have two principal problems when corresponding with their partners. Firstly, students are often unaware of how to create correspondence which would enable them to acquire the appropriate knowledge from their partners. Secondly, they are often unable to analyse and interpret the data they receive from the target culture. Based on the data collected here, students need to be trained in how to establish a working relationship with their partner as well as how to pose questions which will enable them to acquire insightful information about the target culture. (Suggestions for achieving both these aims were subsequently put forward.) Following that, students also need to be made aware that learning about a foreign culture involves more that simply learning about its products and practices. It also requires understanding the meanings which these products and practices hold in the foreign culture. If learners can be explicitly trained in the skills of interaction and analysis and can also be sensitised to developing this type of cultural awareness before or while they engage in networked exchanges, then they are more likely to benefit from the experience of intercultural contact and to improve their ICC.

These findings therefore highlight the role of the teacher in NBLT and telecollaboration to a greater extent that has often been the case until now. The findings demonstrate the inappropriateness of the term 'guide on the side' for describing the role of the teacher in on-line classrooms. An overview of how on-line activities between students in Essen and Michigan were exploited in the our classroom illustrated the many teacher-led activities which intercultural exchanges may still require. The important role of the teacher in developing cultural awareness and the appropriate skills of investigation is confirmed by Fischer in his research on e-mail exchanges:

"…inexperienced students need the help of their teachers in developing such questions or even help with getting into such a mode of enquiry. The 'matured experience of the adult learner' to which Dewey refers, or the knowledge that the teacher has of the material, should guide students in the classroom." (1998: 17)

Finally, the research also revealed how the institutional and socio-cultural contexts play an important role in how on-line exchanges develop. Issues of computer access and differing attitudes as to how e-mail correspondence should function meant that learners in this study were often surprised or shocked by their partners' behaviour. It was suggested that making learners aware of such practical differences can support learners in the process of developing intercultural communicative competence.

5.   A Blended Approach to Cultural Studies - *Ireland and the Irish*

"It's not easy for Germans to think of Ireland as a country with such a good economy and high technologies. Most Germans still have these romantic pictures in their minds when they think of your country. You know, this green-pastures-with-sheep-stuff." *Message board post by Anja and Nina, from Germany to their Irish partners.*

5.1 Introduction

The previous study in this thesis focussed on how e-mail and web-based intercultural exchanges between two groups of learners can contribute to developing learners' ICC. This chapter also looks at how on-line technologies can contribute to developing this area, but different technologies and a different approach to ICC is taken. The study investigates how new technologies can be employed to support a specialised course in Cultural Studies (i.e. a modern version of *Landeskunde* as described in 1.4.2). The networked technologies used this time include a course platform on the World Wide Web and an on-line discussion forum. While it would be inaccurate to establish a dichotomy between courses in foreign language learning and Cultural Studies, it is realistic to recognise the existence of courses at third level institutions throughout the world whose focus is more specifically on the target society than on the target language. (Examples of Cultural Studies courses in various countries can be found in Mountford and Wadham-Smith, 2000.)

As is the case with many courses of modern Cultural Studies, the ultimate aim was intercultural communicative competence, but this was to be achieved primarily through an analysis of texts and up-to-date sociological information about a particular culture, in this case Ireland. It is not my intention to present this course as the 'state of the art' in on-line Cultural Studies, but rather as an exploration of how these technologies can be exploited to achieve such learning aims. The chapter is divided primarily into five sections. Section 5.2 reviews some recent reports of the use of on-line resources for Cultural Studies. Following that, in 5.3, the on-line platform in which this particular course in Cultural Studies was located will be presented and some of its limitations will be explored. Section 5.4 outlines the course *Ireland and the Irish* and explains how it was devised to combine the various on- and off-line elements as effectively as possible. The following section, 5.5, gives an overview of the German group which took part in the course and explores their perceptions to Ireland, Cultural Studies and on-line learning. Finally, section 5.6 presents the findings of the qualitative research into this course.

5.2 Web-based Approaches to Cultural Studies

In chapter two various methods which have been used for exploiting on-line and multimedia-based technologies for developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) were reviewed. Projects such as *Cultura*, *Webconstellations*, *Berliner Sehen* and various telecollaborative exchanges have all demonstrated the capacity of new technologies to make learners aware of their own values and to develop the relevant skills and attitudes of ICC. However, it was seen in the study in chapter four that on-line intercultural exchanges, in the form of either e-mail correspondence or *Cultura*-type comparative exercises, will not usually provide learners with the knowledge of the target culture which also forms an integral part of culture learning and the development of ICC. Referring to the importance of this factual knowledge about the target culture, Byram, et. al. warn that "it would be misguided to assume that learners do not need some 'background' information. Indeed it is misguided to think that such information is mere 'background'" (1994: 48).

While student partners may not be the ideal sources for gaining such cultural information, the World Wide Web (WWW) is considered by many researchers and educators as an ideal location for learners to find out information about the target culture. Kerkhoff (2001: 214-215) sees the WWW as supporting *Landeskunde* as it provides quick access to information from one's desktop, offers a wide range of resources on the topic (not just the mainstream titles) and presents multimedia representations of the cultural product or practice. Technical features of the Internet, such as the ability to navigate through texts with hypertext and to access more than one text at a time by opening various windows are also seen by the author as being advantageous for working on Landeskunde materials. Similarly, Olaska (2000: 259) sees the WWW as being suited for developing cultural awareness as, firstly, on-line navigation is seen to be more motivating that using traditional text-based materials, secondly, students have greater control over the material and thirdly, the Internet makes access to the target culture more democratic as it avoids financial and personal restrictions which a period abroad might entail.

However, reports in the literature up to now appear to involve a rather limited approach to what web-based cultural studies can involve. Work by Kerkhoff (2001),

Schlabach (1997) and Donath (1996) reflect the view that cultural studies on-line involves presenting learners with links to authentic websites and then providing them with the media literacy skills necessary to evaluate these sites through project and group work.

However, if Cultural Studies is taken to have ICC as its central aim (which now commonly appears to be the case), then such an approach must also inevitably be seen as limited and not a complete solution to engaging in Cultural Studies on-line. Byram suggests that knowledge in ICC does not merely focus on factual information about the home and target cultures, but also on how each culture is viewed by members of the other culture: "learners need to know not only about the emblems, myths and other features of national memory in both countries but also about mutual perspectives on them ('le regard croisé')" (1997a: 66). To achieve this, Byram suggests that a comparative method to culture learning is necessary. This concept of comparison is developed further by Byram, Morgan and colleagues (1994: 42-47) who explain that it is through seeing how their own culture is perceived by members of the target culture that learners can realise what they have taken as being 'normal' and 'natural' is actually a part of their culturally constructed worldview.

The examples of on-line Cultural Studies mentioned above do not appear to take into account this comparative aspect of culture learning. The reports seem to focus more on how to retrieve information from the WWW and how to report it to others than on how to engage learners in a comparative analysis of cultural perspectives on this information. The activities therefore represent networked technologies being exploited within a rather traditional understanding of Cultural Studies, which involves an unreflective transfer of information. In contrast, if Byram's model of ICC is to be followed, then learners should be engaged in activities which require an investigative and reflective approach to the on-line material. In the words of Durant: "Priority in British Cultural Studies should accordingly be given not only to the accumulation or presentation of 'facts' but to ways of developing skills in interpreting or 'reading' such facts" (1997: 24). Learners could be required to answer questions such as 'In the website which you find on the topic X, what themes are seen to be important for members of the target culture?', 'How do members of the target culture perceive X?' or 'What differences do you find between your and their perceptions of the topic X?'.

Questions such as these represent a move away from the cultural products and practices in themselves and instead focuses on the home and target cultures' *perceptions* of these.

Later in this chapter, it will be seen that the on-line course in Cultural Studies reported here attempted to take such a comparative approach to culture learning. However, first of all, the virtual learning environment in which the course was located will be presented.

5.3 Virtual Learning Environment: Linguistics Online

The course in Irish Cultural Studies reported here was entitled "Ireland and the Irish: Intercultural Perspectives" and took place at the University of Essen in the Winter semester of 2002/03. The course used a blended approach of weekly contact classes combined with on-line components on the *Linguistics Online* platform. *Linguistics Online* is a virtual learning environment developed over a three year period by the Universities of Marburg, Essen and Wupperthal. A virtual learning environment is a broad term for describing a location on the Internet where students "are able to view course materials, work on projects in small collaborative groups, engage in discussion, access reference materials and communicate with their peers and teachers" (Franklin and Peat, 2001: 38). The original problems which brought about the need for such on-line facilities for university students in Germany were similar to those at universities in other national contexts at the time. These included increasing number of students, reductions in tenured staff and problems which students were having in combining class attendance with part-time work (Barajas and Ownen, 2000; Franklin and Peat, 2001; Wolff, in press). Offering students learning opportunities in an on-line context was seen as a partial solution to these problems.

5.3.1 The Structure of the On-line Courses

As the name suggests, the *Linguistics Online* platform originally offered only courses in Linguistics, such as Phonology and Introduction to Linguistics. However, after the first year of the project, courses in areas of Applied Linguistics (EFL Methodology, Corpus Linguistics) were added to these 'pure' Linguistics courses. Courses in English Literature and this course in Irish Cultural Studies were both added in the Winter semester, 2002-2003. By December 2002, there were over 450 students taking part in courses which were based on the *Linguistics Online* platform. Twelve different courses were being offered to nineteen different groups of students at the three universities of the project. Most courses were being carried out using a combination of on-line learning and contact phases, although four courses did have purely virtual versions.

All the courses on the platform have a number of common characteristics. Each course is made up of ten to fourteen on-line 'modules' or 'units' each of which in turn consists of a virtual session containing course content, guiding questions and a worksheet. The worksheet in each unit usually involves filling out answers to questions based on the course content in an interactive template and then sending it directly to the e-mail of the course tutor. A tutor tool (i.e. interactive quizzes) and an in-class practical worksheet may also be included in each unit. Each course also contains a message board and chat room to facilitate teacher-student and student-student interaction in both asynchronous and synchronous modes. Finally, the homepage of each course also offers a bibliography, lists of relevant external links and access to databases of important linguists and the world's languages.
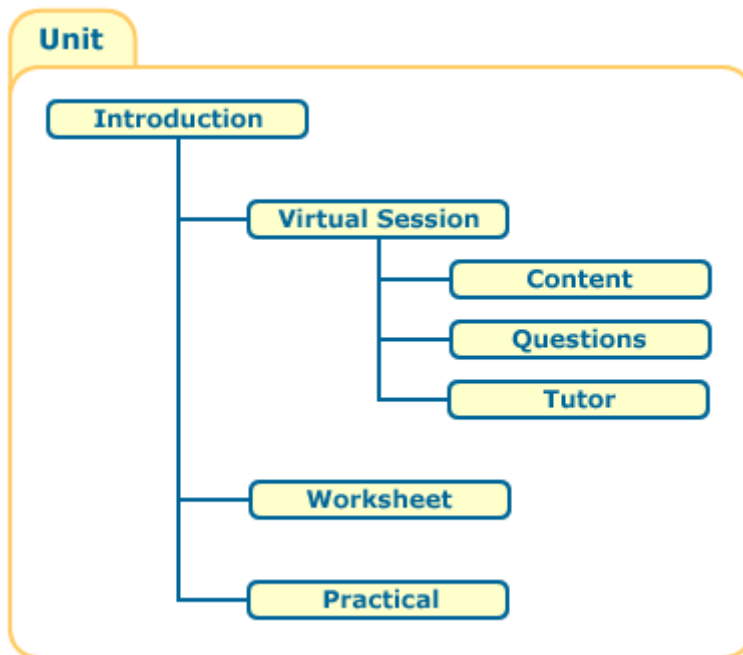
Fig. 5.1 The Structure of a Web Unit (Handke, 2002)

The content of the courses in *Linguistics Online* is presented using a combination of text, still graphics, animations, sound and video. Users are encouraged to interact with the material through a variety of techniques which include simple effects, such as roll-overs and pop-up windows, as well as selection lists, true or false questions, drag and drop activities and multiple choice quizzes. All content within a unit is hyperlinked in order to support exploration and the structuring of information.

5.3.2 Limitations of the Platform

During my previous experience of developing courses in Applied Linguistics for the *Linguistics Online* platform I became aware that although the platform offered a very comprehensive virtual learning environment, there were certain aspects of the platform's current structure and design which should be adapted in order to better support my planned course in Cultural Studies. These will be looked at here briefly and then I will describe how I tried to adapt the design of course materials on the platform accordingly. It should be made clear at this stage that in no way is the following critique intended as a dismissal of the platform's potential for delivering on-line courses. Nevertheless, by highlighting the limitations which were encountered, it is easier to illustrate the issues which arise when trying to exploit the Internet for teaching the cultural dimension of foreign language education.

One of the main issues to arise in the process of creating a course on the platform was the issue of hyperlinks. Brown (1997), in his paper on designing effective on-line courses, suggests that hyperlinks have two main functions. Firstly, they allow learners to decide for themselves which paths they wish to take through the material and secondly, in-built hyperlinks to on-line sources outside the course allow authors to provide alternative perspectives and opinions to their own in the explanation of the material. However, it appeared that the use of hyperlinks in *Linguistics Online* was not achieving either of these functions. Firstly, as can be seen in the screen shot below (fig. 5.2), a navigation bar on the left-hand side of each screen clearly highlighted each part of the course content in the unit and thereby gave a linear structure to the material. Learners were encouraged to click on each of the points on the navigation bar in order to move through the module step by step, thereby not missing any possible links or pop-ups. While such an approach may offer a certain security for learners, it nevertheless takes away from the independence and freedom of navigation which hypertext documents are meant to offer.

Secondly, the approach to hyperlinks on the platform was considered to be problematic as links to external sites outside the platform itself were not encouraged. This was explained by one of the platform's creators in the following way: "Any link to the outside world would irritate the learner since the e-learning environment of the

Campus would have to be left. Links to external information is thus only presented in specified link sections" (Handke, 2002).

In contrast to this approach, it could be argued that one of the major benefits of the Internet and hyperlinks is the ability to visit different sources of information on the one topic. For this reason, it was decided that in the course *Ireland and the Irish,* hyperlinks to outside web-pages would be included within the course content. This was considered vital in a course of Cultural Studies which was intended to exploit the Internet's potential for providing access to up-to-date, authentic materials as well as multiple perspectives. It was also decided that these links would lead to the external sources in separate windows so that students would not have any difficulties later in returning to the main course content.
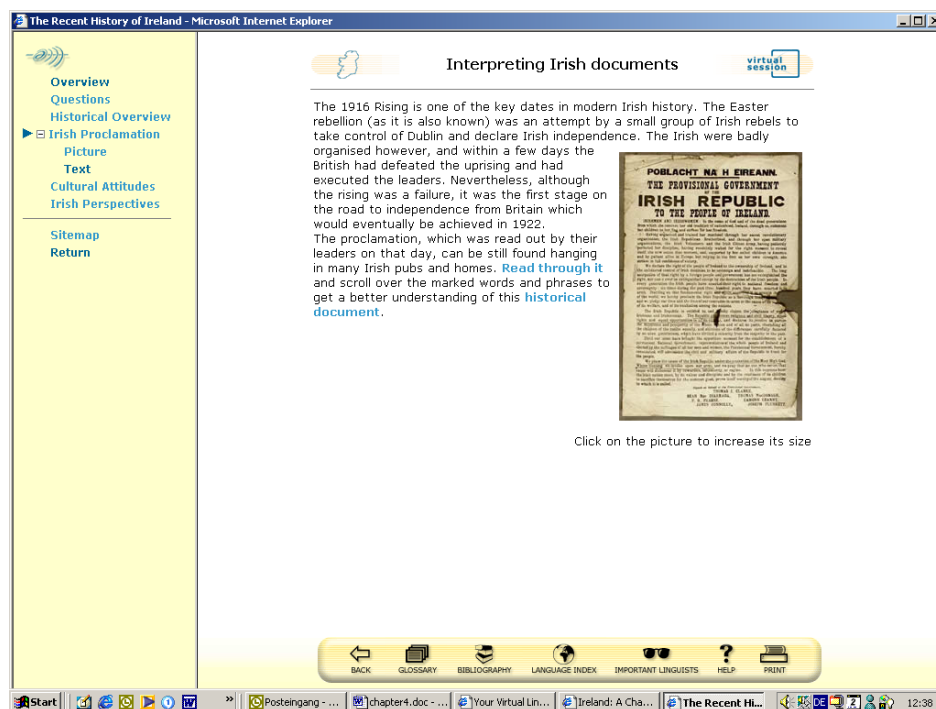
Fig. 5.2 A screen shot from *Linguistics Online*. The navigation bar is on the left of the screen

The second drawback with the design of the platform was related to the question of how information was being presented and the approach to learning which this was indirectly supporting. Although many features and tools in the on-line courses were described as 'interactive', the units often gave the impression of reflecting a transmission model of knowledge acquisition. This could be seen in the way the course content was presented in a lecture format. Students were expected to read through the

on-line material and make notes on the key points. This was then followed by practice quizzes (true or false or multiple choice activities in the tutor function) and the on-line worksheet which involved learners applying what they had learned in the modules to different tasks. The units did not offer students many opportunities to interact with each other in order to construct meaning together or to reflect on the meaning with which they had been confronted with. The message board and chat rooms, when they were used, were seen as a place for students to socialize or to meet the teacher in order to clarify the meaning of what had been read in the units. Writers such as Megarry (1989) and Brown (1997) would appear to be against such an approach to on-line learning. Brown explains:

> "Simply providing information, or even access to it, is not enough. Learners need opportunities to reflect on the new material, discuss their tentative understandings with others, actively search for more information to throw light on areas of interest or difficulty and build conceptual connections to their existing knowledge base (1997: 117)."

Such a social-constructivist approach to learning was not supported on this platform. Information was often transferred from teacher/author to the learners and they were then expected to commit this information to memory. The tools used to encourage interactivity in the units were limited to the user interacting with the computer and many of these interactive elements merely involved clicking on hyperlinked words or phrases to reveal pop-ups or roll-overs or carrying out simple alternative exercises (see fig. 5.3 below). It is unclear how such limited interactivity would support learners in linking this new information with what they already knew and in internalising it.

In summary, the lack of external links, the missing opportunities to reflect on and critically appraise the material and the underlying impression that all learners needed to know about the topic was already there on the platform, meant that *Linguistic Online* courses tended to underline a passive, transmission model of learning. Referring to other educational programs of this nature, Kern warns us that: "By providing so much information so easily, such programs can in effect make reading a very one-way process of receiving the fruits of someone else's work" (2000: 228).

In order to avoid giving this impression in the Cultural Studies course, various techniques were to be employed. Firstly, Students would be encouraged to reflect on the

content by being engaged in in-class activities based on the units. These activities included webquests, in-class debates and discussions (using resources available in the units). Secondly, the units also contained supplementary materials (such as interviews and surveys carried out with Irish people) which showed critical perspectives and alternative opinions on the factual material. Furthermore, activities and content in the units were often followed immediately by a prompt to go to the message board so that students could discuss what they had just read with their classmates and Irish partners.
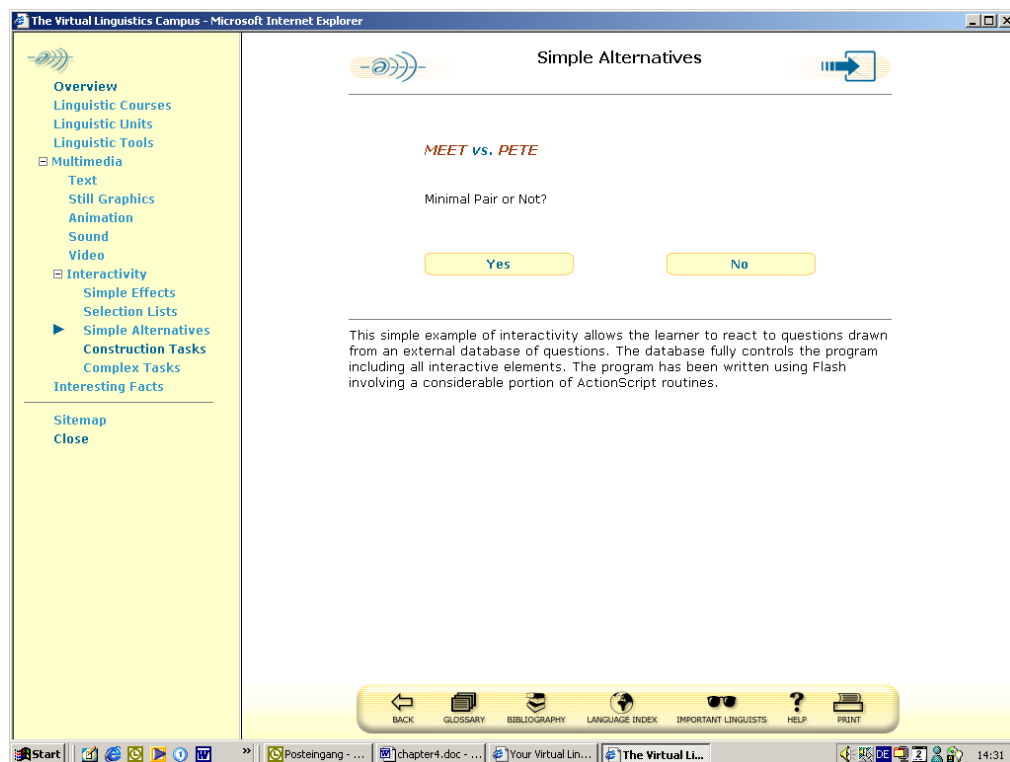
Fig. 5.3 Screen shot from one of the Linguistics tutor activities in Linguistics Online

A further drawback which emerged from the early stages of evaluation being carried out by Wuppertal university (Wolff, in press) was that the platform and its content units appeared to be more suited to dealing with declarative learning items (i.e. factual information or 'knowledge that…') rather than supporting the development of procedural knowledge (i.e. skills, strategies and processes). The need for authors to break down the learning content into bullet points and short texts risked, according to Wolff, bringing about "the fragmentation of knowledge". He suggests that:

"It seems to be easy to handle simple factual information in a web-based course. But as soon as learning content becomes more complex learning seems to become more difficult in a virtual space (in press: np)."

Similarly my own experience in authoring modules in an EFL Methodology course had also revealed that, while the on-line platform had allowed us to get across background information and examples in a manner which was perhaps more interesting and attractive than it would have appeared in a textbook, the process of critically analysing classroom excerpts or getting learners to create their own lesson plans were best suited to classroom work. Therefore, in *Ireland and the Irish*, an attempt was made to make the on-line course more suited to developing process-based learning as well as declarative information by including activities which would develop students' skills of interpreting and relating as well as those of discovery and interaction. These activities involved the combination of the on-line course materials with discussions on the message board with the Irish students and with in-class tasks.

Although the problems pointed out here were significant, I believed that the platform still had a great deal of potential and I was certain that much of the effectiveness of on-line courses depended, firstly, on how they were designed and secondly, on how they were integrated into the classroom context.

5.4 'Ireland and the Irish'

5.4.1 Designing the course

The Cultural Studies course *Ireland and the Irish* was to take a blended format, combining traditional contact classes with the *Linguistics Online* platform, thereby exploiting the Internet's potential for cultural learning. The fact that the German class was going to take place in a classroom fully equipped with on-line computers made facilitating the blending of on-line and off-line learning quite easy to organise. I also decided that the virtual learning environment could best be exploited by combining on-line units which would contain authentic materials and activities related to Irish products and practices with an on-line exchange with students from Ireland via the platform's message board. It was hoped that the on-line units would serve to develop students' knowledge and the skills of interpreting and relating (Byram, 1997a), while the message board exchange would complement the units by allowing the German group to interact with members of the target culture and to exchange their perceptions and opinions on what they were reading about in their course. The combination of these two activities was also intended to accentuate the difference and important link between factual information (that which would be found in the on-line courses) and the foreign culture's perceptions and understanding of this information (to be found on the on-line exchange).

In order to find a partner class in Ireland, I contacted Katrin Eberbach, a German language teacher at Trinity College, Dublin. I explained my idea of combining an exchange between our students on the course message board with the content of the on-line modules and she agreed to incorporate one of her classes of German language learners to the project. It was also agreed that my class of German students would write in English, while her group would write in German, thereby providing authentic language practice for both sets of learners.

The course in Essen therefore reflected the organisational structure shown in the diagram below in fig. 5.4. Students would work on on-line units made available to them on the *Linguistics Online* platform. These units would include a combination of texts and multimedia resources (taken partly from authentic sources and party authored by

myself) about various topics along with descriptions of different activities which could be carried out either on-line or in class. The content of these units would then be discussed and further explored by the exchange with Irish students on the message board.

The general process of interaction on the message board involved one of the two teachers posting the topic for discussion for the week on the message board (for example, the role of religion in your country, attitudes to immigration) and then the two groups would exchange their thoughts and experiences on the subject. These topics were generally clearly related to what the German students were studying in their on-line units, as this task from the third week of the exchange illustrates:

```
This week the German students have completed their second on-line
module which offers a brief overview of modern Irish history. Based on
this, they have been asked to decide which aspect or person from
recent Irish history most interests them. Now, here on the notice
board, the German group should tell their Irish partners which aspect
(or person or event) they have chosen and explain why. The Irish group
should then explain how this aspect of Irish history is considered in
Ireland today. They should also give their own opinions or views on
this.
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.1

The posts by the Irish students would then usually be followed by the German group who would ask the Irish further questions about what they had read in the on-line unit. The contact class for the German group would involve further work on the content of the on-line units (usually pair or group work or class discussion) and also analysis of the postings of each group on the message board that week. Worksheets of interesting posts were studied in order to encourage reflection on the Irish students' posts and also to support understanding of the characteristics of CMC. Regularly, in the contact classes further questions and issues emerged which then would lead to the German students returning to the message board to check with their Irish partners on what had come up. An example of this can be found on week three of the message board:

```
Last class we were discussing the ways of expression of national pride in
Germany. We went into a question of the anthem. Robert told us a little bit
about the Irish anthem and about the fact that not every Irish man knows
the text, but all of the Irish know two last lines and sing them all
together and pretty loud. But what is your anthem for you? How do you react
when you hear it?…
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.2

It therefore becomes clear that the three components of this blended course (i.e. the contact classes, the on-line classes and the message board) were strongly connected together, each part relying on the other two for either content, perspectives or the development of skills. This is reflected in the diagram below (fig. 5.4) by arrows moving in both directions between each component. As will be seen later, by combining the three components in this way, it was possible to allow each environment develop the areas of ICC to which it was particularly suited. A brief overview of the course content can be seen in table 5.1 below also.
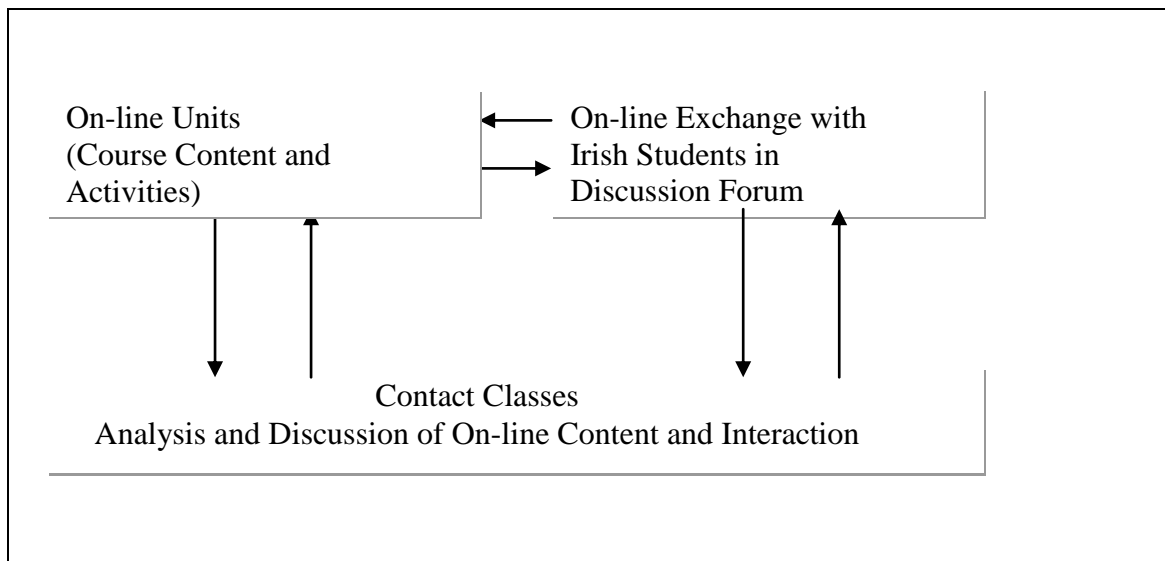
Fig. 5.4 A Blended Learning Approach to Cultural Studies

Wk	On-line Unit	Unit Content	In-class Activities	Message Board Task
1	Ireland: A Changing society	1. Authentic Materials: Recent Changes in Ireland. 2. Irish Perspectives: The German character	Group work on Irish cities websites. On-line activity on pragmatic differences German / English	Introductions / Describing your home town
2-3	Modern Irish History- An overview	1. Overview of modern Irish history. 2 Different cultural perspectives to history	Discussion on different cultural perspectives to history. Watching 'Michael Collins'	Discussing important Irish historical figures / Pride in one's home culture
4-5	The Celtic Tiger	1. Video: The Celtic Tiger. 2. Webquest links and task.	Webquest of different aspects of Celtic Tiger	Recent Changes in Irish society / Immigration in Ireland and Germany
6-7	Religion in modern Irish society	1. Authentic Materials: Irish attitudes to church and morality. 2. Analysing trends in society	Analysing reasons for change in religious practices. Comparison of survey results on moral values.	Attitudes to religion in Ireland and Germany
8-9	Language in Ireland	1. Timeline: English and Irish languages in Irish history. 2. Materials for debate on role of Irish	Debate on the learning of Irish in Irish schools	Attitudes to the Irish language in Ireland
10-11	Northern Ireland and the Troubles	1. Webquest materials and links on Northern Ireland	Webquest on different events in the troubles	Preparations for web-page creation project
12-14	Web-page creation	NO UNIT	Planning and designing web-page with Irish partners	Negotiations and exchange of information about web-page project

Table 5.1: An overview of course content for *Ireland and the Irish*

The following section looks in more detail at how the course content was designed to reflect the characteristics of modern approaches to Cultural Studies.

5.4.2 *Ireland the Irish* and Cultural Studies

At this stage it is perhaps useful to recapitulate the principles of modern Cultural Studies (outlined in 1.4.2.1) and explore how these were translated into this course. In brief, Nünning and Nünning (2000) suggested that Cultural Studies should be learner-centred, process-oriented and should involve both cognitive and affective learning. It should also reflect the reality that many sub-cultures exist within one 'nation', underline the belief that language and culture learning are strongly connected and challenge learners to appreciate other perspectives on cultural behaviour. However, all of these aspects are reflected in the central goal of Cultural Studies, which is the development of intercultural communicative competence (2000: 6 and see also Kramer, 1997: 147). By developing courses which deal with the various skills, attitudes, knowledge and awareness of ICC, teachers will inevitably focus heavily on the learners' own culture and will offer a range of materials and activities which work on skills and strategies as well as facts and figures. Furthermore, aspects such as sub-cultures within one nation and the link between language and culture are likely to form part of any interculturally oriented curriculum.

5.4.2.1 Skills of discovery and interaction

The message board exchange with students from Dublin was aimed at developing learners' skills of discovery and interaction. As students were first finding out about events, trends and developments in Irish history and society through the on-line units and then going to the message board to find out their partners' perspectives on these aspects, it was hoped that the German group would achieve the objective of being able to elicit information and interact effectively with members of the target culture. To develop these skills, students were supported in their on-line interactions by guidelines in the on-line units and by working on worksheets in our contact classes which showed particularly successful or weak postings. In this way, students had an opportunity in the classroom to reflect on what a good posting consisted of and how they could analyse their partners' contributions. Furthermore, very often during the course students commented on the 'strange' on-line behaviour of their Irish partners. By discussing, for

example, why the Irish insisted on using the formal 'Sie' form in German and why they refused to engage in more active debate on the message board, students also began to become more aware of cultural differences in interaction.

5.4.2.2 Critical cultural awareness

During this course, the students were encouraged to develop a critical awareness of themselves and their own values, as well as those of other people by being engaged in various on-line and in-class activities. Firstly, in an on-line activity on different cultural perspectives, students were shown a portrait of Michael Collins, the Irish revolutionary, and were told that such portraits of military 'heroes' can often be found hanging in Irish pubs and homes. They could then on interactive buttons to read German and Irish interpretations of this cultural practice and were asked to reflect on how they would react to seeing such a portrait hanging on a wall and why they would react that way (see fig. 5.5 below). A second activity to develop critical cultural awareness involved an in-class discussion and survey based on an on-line article about changing attitudes to morals in Irish society. Students were asked in class to carry out a survey among themselves relating to their attitudes to certain religious and moral issues. When they had compiled their answers to these questions, they went to the on-line unit to compare their results to the Irish answers reported in a newspaper article. By carrying out such an activity, students were obliged to reflect on some of their own values and principles and then to compare these with results from Irish counterparts.
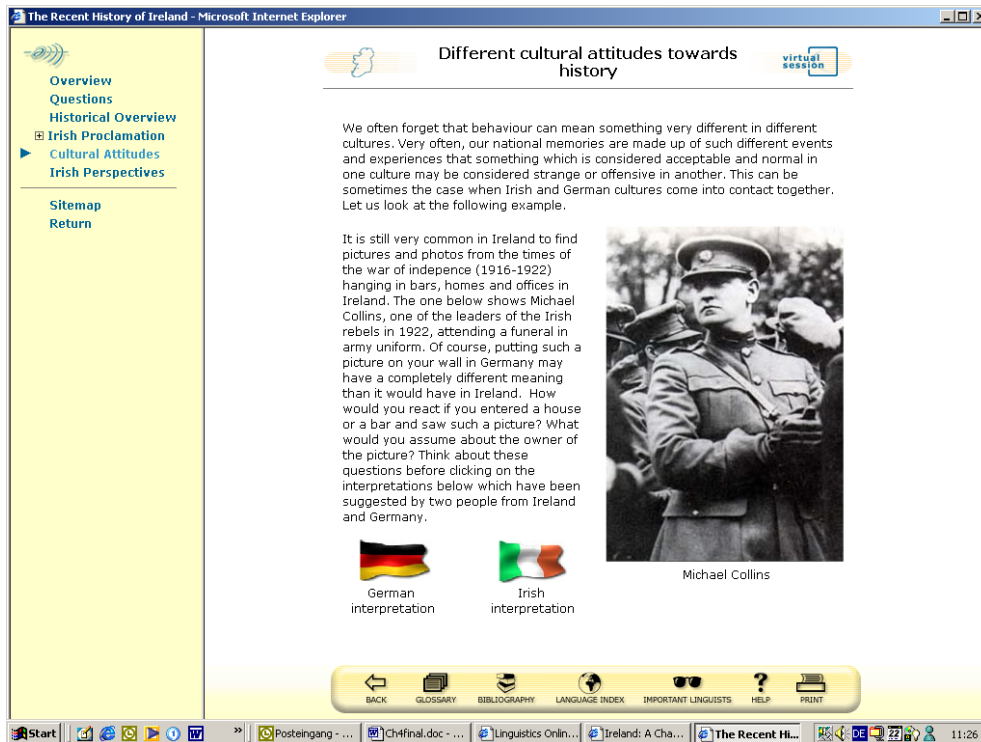
Fig. 5.5 Screen shot of contrasting German and Irish perspectives on cultural behaviour

5.4.2.3 Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices

As was seen in section 5.1, the important aspect of knowledge in ICC, is not only knowing about the various social groups and their products and practices in both cultures, but also knowing about how these products and practices are viewed in each culture and how these different interpretations can influence communication between the two groups. Therefore, the on-line units contained a combination of 'factual' information on Ireland with opinions and explanations of this information from Irish and German sources. Such knowledge was made available not only on the message board (where the German group was regularly exposed to Irish people's perspectives on their national memory and the contemporary relationship between Germany and Ireland), but also in the on-line units which often included sections entitled 'Irish perspectives'. While authoring this course, I had carried out over forty extensive interviews via e-mail with a wide range of Irish people. In these interviews I asked them to give their opinions on various topics which we would be dealing with in our classes. These opinions and perspectives were then integrated into the on-line units to supplement the factual information on each topic. Newspaper surveys and excerpts from on-line discussion boards for Irish people were also included in the units. Such resources were particularly useful in dealing with "the processes and institutions of

socialisation" (Byram, 1997a: 51) in both cultures. In the unit on religion, for example, interview extracts of Irish people describing how the Catholic church influenced life in Ireland were combined with links to surveys on attitudes to the church in national newspapers and to historical background information.

Another important aspect of knowledge in ICC is, of course, making students aware of the relationship between both cultures involved. The complex relationship between Germany and Ireland and the different ways in which each country perceives the other was explored in various ways. The 'Irish Perspectives' section contained many comments from Irish people explaining how Germany is viewed in Ireland. On regular occasions, links to German newspaper articles on Irish issues were offered in order to highlight the German perspective. An in-class activity which supported the development of knowledge of the relationship between the two cultures involved the German group investigating a list of web-pages which had been created by German people about Ireland. The students were asked to identify what aspects of Ireland the German people had liked and disliked and they were then asked to speculate as to what this may tell us about German society.

5.4.2.4 Skills of interpreting and relating

Byram considers the skill of interpreting a document from another culture to be closely related to the knowledge which the individual has about that culture (1997a: 37) as knowledge is necessary to identify the culturally specific perspectives and values which a document may contain. When designing the on-line modules, I considered the use of hypertext and roll-overs as useful tools for developing students' awareness of how specific historical and social reasons as well as certain values and principles could lie behind Irish cultural documents or practices. One example involved showing students the declaration of independence which had been read out by Irish rebels in 1916. This important historical document contains many references to previous historical events, to aspects of the political situation at the time and also to certain principles and values which the rebels claimed to represent. Without knowing these cultural references, it was likely that the students would fail to understand a great deal of the significance of this document. By using the roll-over function, I was able to insert explanations of these cultural references, thereby making students aware that such

cultural documents need to be 'read' in a way which involves analysing their historical connotations, origins and sources (see fig. 5.6 below).
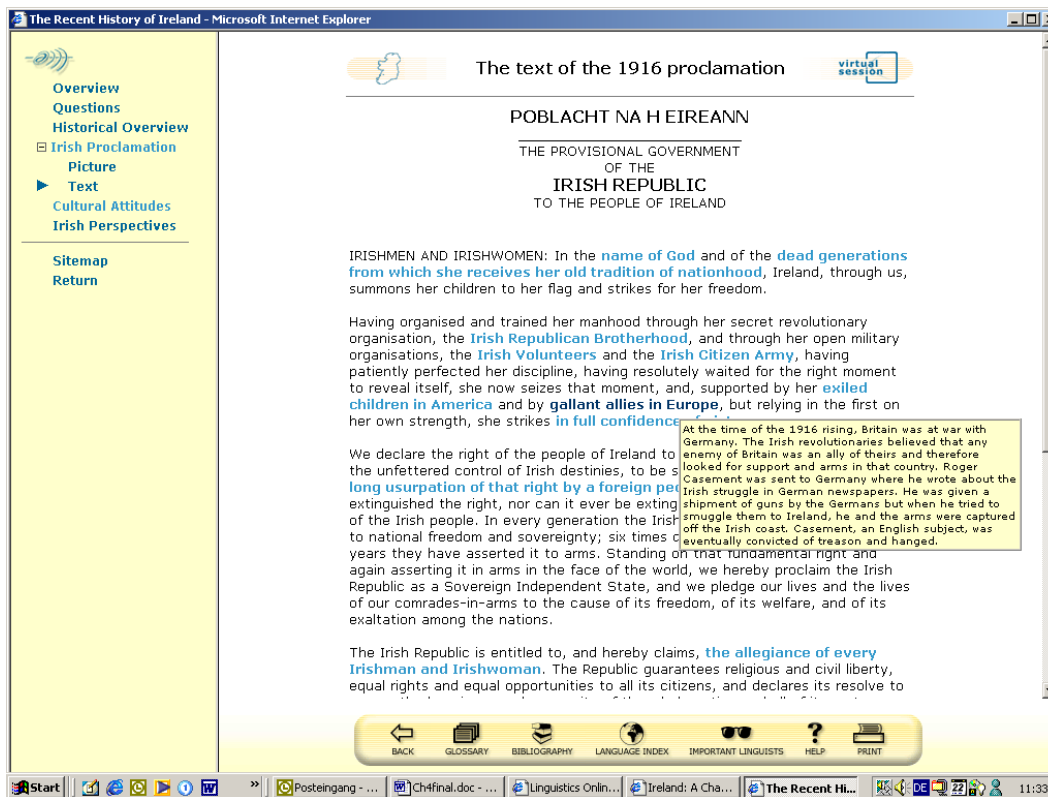
Fig. 5.6 Screen shot of roll-over enhanced version of a cultural document

Finally, another example of how students were supported in developing their ability to interpret products and practices from another culture involved showing learners a graph which showed the decline in mass attendance in Ireland. The students were then asked to visit various resources in their on-line unit in order to come up with a theory as to why this might be happening, thereby analysing the origins of this cultural practice.

5.4.2.5 Attitudes of curiosity and openness

It was difficult to identify what aspects of course content or design which could bring about curiosity on the behalf of the learners towards Ireland. It was hoped that the opportunity to engage in an on-line exchange with 'real' members of the target culture would arouse their interest in finding out more about Ireland, as would the easy access to a great number of up-to-date authentic materials in the on-line units. Also, I hoped that the choice of topics which were relevant to young people in Germany as well as in Ireland (e.g. immigration, dealing with the past, attitudes to morality) would raise their

interest in the country. However, I considered it very important to focus on the second part of these intercultural attitudes – the concept of being willing to discover "other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena" (Byram, 1997a: 58). As Bach points out, "interkulturelle Kompetenz beweist sich ja … insbesondere durch die Fähigkeit und Bereitschaft, Kultur aus der Perspektive des anderen zu sehen" (1998: 200) and one of the main challenges of any course of cultural studies is to bring about this act of decentring (or 'intercultural understanding'), this willingness in learners to accept that their way of viewing things is not the only possible way. I hoped that analysing Irish perspectives in class which had been taken from the message board or the Irish perspectives sections would help to make students aware of other possible perspectives. I also hoped that creating their own websites which involved German and Irish interpretations of one theme or topic would also help to increase this openness to alternative perspectives and develop their willingness to question their own values and presuppositions.

5.5 Profile of The German Class

The group of students which attended the opening class of *Ireland and the Irish* had a distinctly different profile to those who had participated in the on-line exchanges reported in chapter three. In the questionnaires which they completed at the beginning of the course, the class revealed itself to be much more familiar with working with on-line technologies than the previous class had but they also reported being much less familiar with the target culture (in this case, Ireland) than the ILC 2 group had been with the USA in 2001. In this class, 12 of the 16 students had access to the Internet in their homes and 10 of them reported having already used the Internet in their classes, either in high school or at University. Some had used it to access authentic materials (such as newspapers) in their foreign language classes. Three students reported already having taken part in courses which had used the *Linguistics Online* platform. On-line language learning was seen positively by many of the students as it gave them an opportunity to learn how to use the Internet and therefore 'prepare themselves' for their later role as teachers. Susanne explained that: "The most important reason to choose this course was the fact that I study Lehramt and every teacher should gain some skills referring to new media" while Christine wrote "First of all I think it is a good idea to learn how to work with the medium internet in a big course like this. When we will be teachers (one day, far, far in the future) it will be certainly very important to know about this medium so we can use it in our classes". Many others wrote that they were attracted to the course because they knew very little about Ireland, while others mentioned that they had been attracted by the description of the course which had underlined the fact that students would have to take an active involvement in the classes. Sara explained:

> „Es klang sehr interessant im KVV [the booklet containing the study programme for students] und war der einzige Kurs, indem man mit dem Internet arbeiten kann. Ich finde es immer gut, wenn man sich an einem Kurs beteiligen "muss", weil man dann auch was davon hat. Bei vielen Kursen sitzt man nur die Zeit ab, und das ist eigentlich schade für Studenten und Dozenten."

Only two of the 16 members of the class had been to Ireland before and none of them mentioned knowing any Irish people personally. Therefore, when asked before the course what image they had of Ireland, students tended to mention the common stereotypical images of the country and its people. Nicole suggested that "Irish people

are friendly, they love singing and dancing, they are very religious. Moreover they are never in a hurry and take their time in doing things". Christine mentioned that "there is at first the typical image of the red haired man with a Guinness in his hand dancing like the ones in river dance." Many of the students mentioned the Irish reputation for drinking. However, students were eager to point out that they were aware that their images were stereotypical and probably had little truth to them. Nicole said: "But you learn lots of these things at school. You have got textbooks with friendly smiling, red-haired Irish people in it and teachers do not really try to get rid of those clichés". Referring to the stereotypical images which she had, Christine said "But honestly I think every country has to fight against this. Just think about Lederhosen und Dirndel and so on." Nadine assumed that her image of Irish people sitting in pubs and watching football "comes from TV and books".

Finally, it was interesting to see the students' definitions of what they understood as *Landeskunde* and what their previous experiences of culture learning had been until now. Many reported never having actually dealt with *Landeskunde* in their foreign language classes and those who did appeared to be very critical of how the area had been approached. The following comments are representative of the students' responses:

Nicole	I have done one Landeskunde class before and it was about America. We learned a lot about the image the Americans have of us (the Germans) and talked about our image of Americans. Finally we found out that parts of our image were wrong. At school we did not do much Landeskunde. We talked about politics in Great Britain, "Blacks" in America, sheep in Australia und the troubles in Northern Ireland. But we only got our textbook texts and old newspaper articles. I missed the reference to the countries and life there nowadays.
Sara	In der Schule im Englischunterricht haben wir das alltägliche Leben in Amerika, Groß Britannien und Australien behandelt. Außerdem die Geschichte von Amerika, multikulturelle Gesellschaften, Native Americans. Dabei haben wir nur mit normalen Lehrbüchern gearbeitet. In der Uni hatte ich einen Landeskunde-Kurs. Der hat überhaupt nichts gebracht, weil der Dozent 90 Minuten durchgeredet hat und überhaupt keine Beteiligung gewollt hat. Außerdem war das Thema auch nicht interessant, so dass ich es auch jetzt schon vergessen habe, obwohl der Kurs letztes Semester war.
Nina	I don't have any experiences with such courses at university. Landeskunde at school was like "England has got ... inhabitants....
Patrick	Most Landeskunde classes just deal with facts and figures, i.e. how many mountains has a country, how high are they etc. We compared special regions of a country with each other – that was quite boring

Table 5.2 Students' previous experience of Landeskunde

It becomes clear here that students were unhappy with both the techniques being used to teach about culture ("weil der Dozent 90 Minuten durchgeredet hat", "most Landeskunde classes just deal with facts and figures") and with the out-of-date materials which they were expected to work with ("we only got our textbook texts and old newspaper articles"). It is interesting that this course had been designed to move away from the traditional 'facts and figures' approach to cultural studies which many of these had experienced. These comments were also significant because they made clear that a course on Cultural Studies must primarily take into consideration what learners understand 'culture learning' to be and what they expect to learn in such a course. If their definitions of culture are limited to facts and figures, then the danger exists that this is exactly what they will take away from a course, no matter how much it is based on the principles of intercultural learning.

5.6 Research Findings

In order to evaluate how the course and its different components were contributing to the German learners' ICC, I collected data at various stages throughout the term. Students were asked to complete qualitative questionnaires at the beginning, and the half-way stage and at the end of the course. These questionnaires were complemented by recorded interviews which usually involved 20 minute face-to-face discussions between myself and two students at a time. I encouraged students to come to the interviews in pairs as I had found that they felt more at ease and were more willing to expand on their answers when they were in the company of another classmate. Very often during the interviews one student would bring up a topic or an issue and the other would then 'take this up' and develop it further. I had the opportunity to interview most students twice during the term. This data from questionnaires and interviews was then triangulated with class transcripts, the content of the message board and some of the comments which students made in the learner diaries which they had submitted to me by e-mail following every second class. Unfortunately, due to their time restrictions the Irish group of students were unable to fill out the questionnaires. For this reason I was unable to gain a good understanding of their experience of the message board exchange. Nevertheless, their teacher and I exchanged e-mails and phone calls regularly on the topic of the exchange and she provided some invaluable input into what 'lay behind' the Irish on-line behaviour.

The remainder of this chapter will look at various aspects of this data, including the students' growing understanding of culture learning, and the contribution of the message board exchange to the development of ICC.

5.6.1 Changing Attitudes to Ireland and Culture Learning

One of the most significant aspects which emerged from the students' feedback data in the course of the semester was their gradual change of understanding of what culture learning involved. Interestingly, not only did they report learning a great deal about Ireland, but they also reported having developed a more complex understanding of what learning about cultures in general really involved. Furthermore, they also reported that

the different elements of the course had led them to reflect regularly on their own culture. Each of these three aspects will now be looked at in more detail.

5.6.1.1 Learning about Ireland

As was seen in the class profile above (5.5), many students as the beginning of the course had admitted that they knew very little about Ireland and that they were bringing stereotypical images of Ireland and the Irish to the course. However, when they were asked in the final questionnaire about whether the course had changed their understanding of Ireland, many reported having moved away from these stereotypical attitudes due to the course content which they had been studying. This is clear in the questionnaire results in which 85% of the students who responded answered positively (i.e. choosing either a 4 or 5 out of a possible 5) when asked if they had increased their understanding of Irish culture during the course. Some of the comments in their final feedback forms also reflected this belief:

Julia	Yes, it changed my understanding of Ireland due to the information and facts I found out during this course. Earlier I only had a very good image of the Irish, but now I know a little bit more as only Irish Pub or "the capital of Ireland is Dublin".
Nadine	In this course, I learnt that Ireland is much more than Irish pubs or "the green island". It has shown much more perspectives than I had.
Nicole	Yes, it has. Especially the last lesson made me think about the conflicts in Ireland and where it comes from once again. This is what most people get wrong!
Nina	Ich denke schon, dass mich dieses Seminar in Bezug auf meine Sichtweise auf Iren und ihr Land in gewisser Weise verändert hat. Man hat da oft Vorurteile im Kopf, hält Iren für konservative Säufer, was vielleicht auch einige von ihnen sind. Aber durch dieses Seminar wurde man auch sensibilisiert für die Probleme, mit denen Irland zu kämpfen hat, dass der Nordirlandkonflikt eben mehr ist als lediglich ein blutiger Streit zw. Katholiken und Protestanten. Außerdem sehe ich jetzt Irland auch als ein sich weiter entwickelndes Land.
Sara	Honestly said I've never thought of Ireland and the Irish before. But the course introduced the country and its people very well. It gave me an overview of the history, the culture, the economic situation and even the people.

Table 5.3 Changing Attitudes to Ireland

These comments are a timely reminder of the importance of factual information in any course of language learning or Cultural Studies. Students reveal here that they used the 'factual information' which they encountered about Ireland to readjust their

understanding of the culture ("the last lesson made me think about the conflicts in Ireland and where it comes from") and begin to divest themselves of their Irish stereotypes.

I suggest that this is a timely reminder as more radical applications of intercultural learning which have stemmed from a rejection of traditional *Landeskunde* would appear to be questioning whether there is a need at all for factual information about target cultures. It was seen in chapter one that certain writers question the need for students to be exposed to factual information about any one particular 'target' culture. Instead, they suggest that teachers should focus on texts based on the home culture or on the development of skills and pragmatic knowledge (see, for example, the arguments of Alptekin (2002) and House (1996, 2000) which were discussed in section 1.2.3). In this way, the authors argue, students can be equipped with skills which they can apply to any situation of intercultural contact and are not restricted to cultures which they have dealt with in their classes. However, the students' comments above and the initial desire which many expressed at the beginning of the course to rid themselves of the stereotypical images which they had of Ireland show that it is not fair on learners' to ignore culture-specific content in their classes. I would not suggest that students learning facts about Ireland in this course was the only factor which led them to change their attitudes the target culture, but I would strongly agree with Klippel when she says: "A foreign language learner will be able to arrive at a more balanced view of the target culture, if she or he knows something about it" (1994: 55).

Of course, this course had focused a great deal on highlighting the different cultural perspectives and understandings which may lie behind Irish products and practices, and the students' comments also revealed a growing awareness that cultural 'facts' should not simply be taken at face value. The following comments contain many references to Irish attitudes and perspectives and how these aspects are important in cultural understanding.

Christine	In the beginning of this course I didn't knew much about Ireland, in so far I learned a lot I think. It was interesting to learn about their attitudes, their national pride…
Manuel	Yes, especially the political situation, although having dealt with it in school, has become clearer during the course. Also the perspectives of Irish people towards their country (patriotism etc.) was interesting and informative.
Nadine	It did not really changed my understanding of Ireland or the Irish people. It gave me a deeper look on it. And I think it was interesting.
Sebastian	Yes, absolutely. Although I knew some facts about (Northern) Ireland from school, I was amazed how much more there was to learn. Such courses, I think, generally help to improve understanding of and between different cultures.
Susa	Especially the exchange with the Irish students helped to gain a different perspective because one tends to judge on the base of your experience.

Table 5.4 Moving on from a Facts and Figures definition of culture

These comments reveal that students were surprised that there was perhaps more to cultural learning than they had first imagined. Nadine suggests that the course had given her "a deeper look" at Ireland and Sebastian admits that he was amazed at how much there was to learn" and that the type of information which he had gained in the course could contribute to better understanding between cultures. Susa shows how the students had benefited from being exposed to alternative interpretations of the cultural information and she recognises that usually "one tends to judge on the base of your experience".

5.6.1.2 Changing Definitions of Culture Learning

It also became clear from the research data that students were learning more than simply about Ireland. The group appeared to be applying the knowledge of how the Irish and the Germans accorded differing interpretations to cultural behaviour to a more overall understanding of how cultures in general differ from each other. As a result, this was also influencing what they thought culture learning should involve. This is confirmed in the data in fig. 5.7. Furthermore, some interview extracts illustrate how the learners had changed their approach to culture learning:
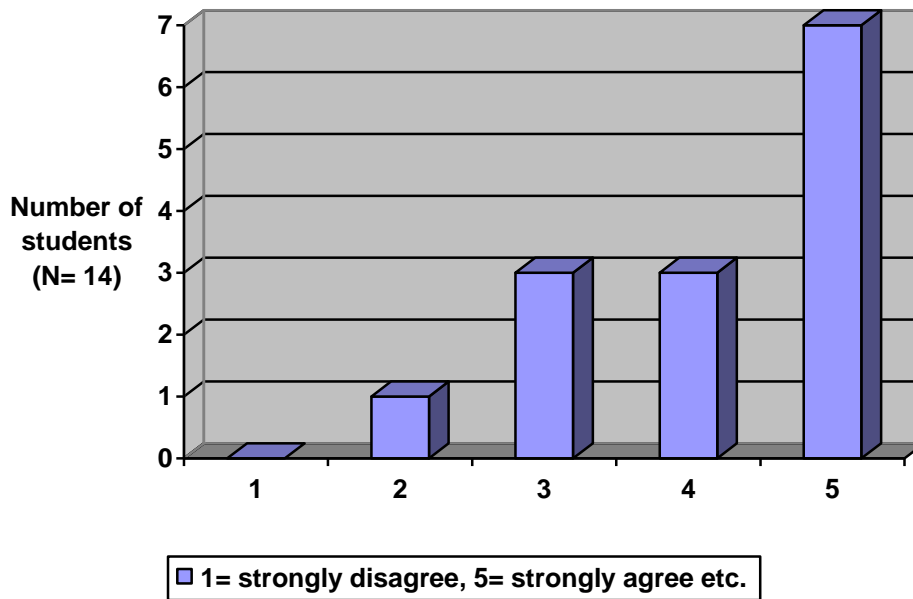
Fig. 5.7 This course has changed my understanding of what Landeskunde involves

Q: What is culture learning for you after this course?
Laura: Its about thinking. Its about getting information about another country and its people and then thinking about the differences between the two countries and even more its thinking about the relations between the two countries.
Q: Where does this definition come from?
Laura: It's a development. Before this course I had never thought of it before. I was never confronted with intercultural learning. Now I have made the experience and I have watched what can happen when you exchange your opinion with people from other countries.
Julia: Yes, due to all this work we do. Due to the work in class. Even at school we had Landeskunde but we never talked to people from other countries.
Laura: This way you see what people are thinking.

Q: What does culture learning mean to you now after this course?
Nadine: It means learning about the other culture and my own culture. Because if I can't understand my own culture, I can't understand the foreign one. Because you can't compare. And what we do in this class is intercultural, absolutely.

Q: Has your understanding of culture learning changed during this course?
Patrick: Its changed a bit, the factual information is there but it's 'relativiert' because of what the Irish say on the board.
Christine: We don't only talk about the facts but also the beliefs behind the facts.

Q: What had culture learning meant for you in the past?
Nina: In school it was all about facts and figures. When I did my teaching practice we did all about the United Kingdom.
Q: How is this different? Facts and figures too?
Nina: Yes, but we learn more about everyday life, in school you just get general information and you don't learn anything about the mentality, here you get to talk to them and write to them.

These students' comments reflect a growing awareness that culture learning involves becoming aware of how the home and target cultures view each other ("thinking about the relations between the two countries"), as well as becoming more aware of one's own culture ("It means learning about the other culture and my own culture"). They also appear to realise that while learning factual information is important, it is also important to be aware of the different cultural interpretations which lie behind this information ("the factual information is there but it's 'relativiert'..." and "We don't only talk about the facts but also the beliefs behind the facts").

The interview extracts would appear to suggest that the students had become aware during this course of the limitations which their definitions of *Landeskunde* until then had involved and had subsequently redefined what culture learning involved. These findings were confirmed in the end of term questionnaires:

Jan	To my mind this course was much more than only a course in which we were told about the culture of a different country. It helped to understand how Irish feel and are in certain points. (e.g. photos of de Valera and Collins on walls)
Manuel	I understood that "Landeskunde" has something to do with knowing your own culture, too, so that you can compare with the foreign culture.
Other Nadine	To my mind this was "real" Landeskunde because we did not only read about a certain country or listened to what a teacher told us but we could ask people who are living in the country we just talked about. So it was more "real".
Nicole	In der Schule wird der Bereich L.kunde immer nur angerissen und auf Zahlen und Fakten beschränkt. Dass aber L.kunde mehr bedeutet, wurde in diesem Seminar deutlich. L.kunde heißt für mich jetzt in erster Linie, Menschen aus anderen Ländern zu verstehen, ihren Lebensstil kennenzulernen und ihnen direkt zu begegnen, um Vorurteile abzubauen.
Patrick	I realized that "Landeskunde" takes into consideration cultural differences and in particular the reasons why they exist.
Sara	This course provided a whole new way of getting to know another country, in this case Ireland. I realised that there is more to it than just reading a few texts and looking at pictures. Being able to interact with our Irish counterparts was, on the one hand, great fun, while on the other hand it gave us a much more authentic view of Ireland.
Seb	Fortunately it has turned out to be more then just figures. The historical background was quite helpful to UNDERSTAND instead of just know.

Table 5.5 Changing definitions of Landeskunde

The comments confirm how students had changed their understanding of what culture learning should entail. Instead of receiving facts in a passive, one-way learning process, Cultural Studies has become a much more pro-active exercise. The students mention self-reflection, getting rid of stereotypes, learning to understand others through interaction with them and finally 'understanding' instead of 'knowing'. In other words, learning was moving from a declarative- to a process-based activity.

If learners are able to take on such an approach to culture learning (i.e. an approach that culture learning is more about *an ability to...* rather than *knowledge that...*), it is likely that the skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness which they develop can be transferred to situations involving cultures other than Ireland. However, in comparison to many EFL textbooks which often avoid cultural-specific content (see section 1.4.1.1), Cultural Studies provide both teachers and students with a concrete focus (in this case, Ireland) upon which they can develop the skills of cultural analysis and attitudes of openness to cultural difference. Once learners have developed their skills, attitudes and

cultural awareness in a particular context, then they will be later be able to apply these attributes to other contexts whether they be focussed on other 'English speaking' cultures or with other non-native speakers in a *lingua franca* context.

5.6.1.3 Reflection on one's own Culture

It was suggested at the beginning of this chapter that many on-line-enhanced approaches to Cultural Studies until now had failed to engage learners in reflection on their own culture. I was therefore interested in identifying whether the German learners in this course had been encouraged to 'decentre' and look at their own culture from a different viewpoint. Bringing learners to engage in this process is not an easy task as the research by Roberts et. al. (2001) into students' ethnographic projects has confirmed (see section 1.4.2.2). Therefore, to encourage critical reflection on the students' own culture the tasks in this course, as well as much of the class discussions had focussed on the comparison of the two culture's different perceptions of certain themes. Byram has this to say on the issue of developing cultural self-awareness through comparison:

> "it is probably easier to relativise one's own meanings, beliefs and behaviours through comparison with others' than to attempt to decentre and distance oneself from what the process of socialisation have suggested is natural and unchangeable." (1997a: 35)

This suggestion was confirmed to a great extent in the end-of-course questionnaire and in the interviews which were carried out with students towards the end of the term. The data in fig. 5.8 show that 85% of the students reported in the affirmative (i.e. either 4 or 5) when asked whether they had reflected on their own culture.
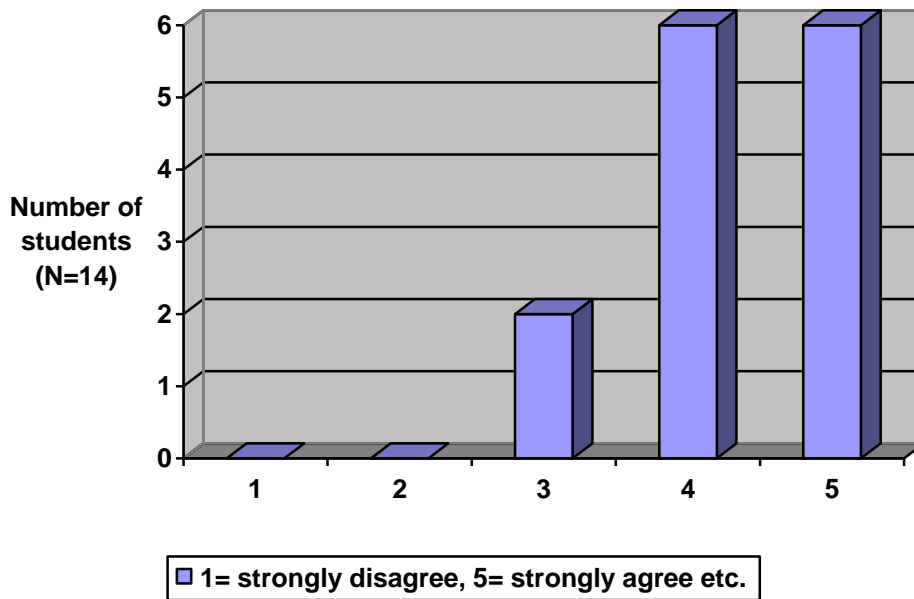
Fig. 5.8 The activities in this course made me reflect on my own culture

Furthermore, this comment from Manuel when he spoke of the exchange with the Irish students seems to illustrate quite well the way the comparative process can help learners to stop and look at their own culture:

> **Manuel:** What I found very helpful was the change of perspective from their point of view towards things that are everyday life for us. I don't wake up every morning and think 'oh, we are a reunified Germany again' so it's normal for us. But you start to rethink it if the other people don't know something about that, so they ask you what kind of impact did the reunification have on your life and you have never thought about this openly and so this is a real reflection."

It would appear that there is no evidence here that Manuel has engaged in any kind of 'change of perspective' or decentring but he has made the first step in this direction. He has been forced to identify and articulate an aspect of his culture which he had taken for granted until then. Other interview and questionnaire extracts also reflect this growing awareness of one's own cultural perspective, even if it not clear to what extent contact with an alternative perspective had brought students to Kramsch's 'third place' located between the home and target cultures. These students are clearly beginning to recognise that the meaning which they attribute to certain cultural products or practices is just one of many. However, there is no evidence that they have used the interaction to go a step further and reconstruct their own interpretations in the light of the foreign perspective which they have encountered:

Laura: If you think about another culture, how they live and how they see things then you automatically think about your own culture and your own way of thinking.

Nadine: When we had the discussion about the national anthem, the flag. There are so many differences to Ireland so I had to think about my own culture.

Seb	Although I knew of the problems in Northern Ireland, our work in class made me all the more aware of religion in Germany in comparison. It is hard to believe that the question of religion should play such an enormous part in one's life. Generally, almost everything we talked about made me think about our own culture. This is an aspect of this course that I find of particular relevance.
Jan	The on-line module made me think about my culture several times. E.g. as it was often mentioned Germans shall be more direct than people from other countries. If some things like this were mentioned, I started to compare these statements to my own experience.
Manuel	Especially the construction of the websites and the exchange with the Irish groups made me think about my own culture. Because one had to think about what to post to the message board, one had to come up with distinctive features of German culture in order to compare them with the Irish culture.
Nina	Ich kann da nur noch mal auf das Portrait von Michael Collins zu sprechen kommen und den damit verbundenen Nationalstolz, den wir Deutschen leider nicht haben. Ich glaube, wir sollten echt mal langsam lockerer werden.

Table 5.6 Students reflection on their own culture

In these extracts, students are becoming aware of aspects of their own culture which until now they appear to have taken for granted. Jan mentions an activity in a web unit which had focussed on socio-pragmatic differences between German and English, while Sebastian compares the different significance of religion in Germany and Ireland. However, Nina's comments are perhaps the only ones which suggest that the course content had actually enabled her to take a different approach to how she perceived her own culture. Her conclusion "wir sollten echt mal langsam lockerer warden" suggests the alternative perspective on national pride which she encountered in the course actually led her to question her interpretation of this issue.

In summary, it would appear then that the members of the course did not, for the most part, achieve the 'third place' which is referred to so regularly in the literature on intercultural learning. However, the evidence here would suggest that the students were

at least made aware that their interpretations of behaviour are not universal and are based on their own cultural values.

5.6.2 Researching the Message Board Exchange

The research results until now have referred to the message board exchange with Dublin as one part of this whole course in Cultural Studies. However, it is worthwhile dedicating this section of the investigation to the telecollaborative component of this course in isolation. There are various reasons for this choice. Firstly, the students reported throughout the course that the on-line exchange was the most exciting and motivating part of the course for them. Secondly, while the concept of 'web units' and 'on-line content' still remains relatively rare in Cultural Studies, many educators are turning to on-line discussion forums to engage their learners in intercultural exchanges. For these reasons, the content and outcomes of this specific part of the course merits particular attention. The data in this section should help to highlight what the on-line exchange contributed to the Cultural Studies course.

5.6.2.1 Background

Throughout the term students from Essen and Trinity had interacted together on-line using the discussion forum on the Ireland and the Irish homepage. In the weeks from mid-October until mid-December, the students focussed on exchanging information and discussing topics which were related to the issues which the Essen group were studying in the on-line modules and also to the issues which were coming up in the Irish group's own German *Landeskunde* classes (see table 5.1 for an overview of the message board tasks). Following the Christmas break, the forum was used chiefly for organisational purposes as both sets of students discussed how their web-pages should be designed and presented. This section of the study looks primarily at the development of the on-line discussions in the first part of the exchange and attempts to identify how it contributed to developing the German students' ICC. Based on the students' feedback and an analysis of the content of the exchange, I will also attempt to suggest how such forums can be made more effective for Cultural Studies.

While the web units had been aimed at developing the students' knowledge of the target culture, the message board exchange was intended to focus (among other things)

on the students' skills of discovery and interaction. In other words, the forum would give both groups of learners practical experience in the challenges of interacting (albeit asynchronously) with members of the target culture. The other main function of the forum in the context of the Irish Cultural Studies course had been to supplement or enhance the 'factual' information about Ireland which the students would be encountering in the web units with perspectives on this information from Irish people their own age.

To confirm whether these aims had been achieved on the discussion forum I referred to the questionnaires and interviews which I had used in the other parts of this research. However, I also developed a classification of the posts which were made on the forum between October and December in order to analyse the nature of the cultural content and to identify how such posts may be contributing to the cultural learning process. Although various other classifications of message board posts already exist in the literature (Christian, 1997; Lamy and Goodfellow, 1999 and Johnson et. al., 2001), I felt that it was necessary to elaborate my own one for this particular piece of research as none of the above mentioned had been specifically developed with the aim of focussing on the cultural component of language learning. However, as was noted previously, all these authors had one common denominator in their classifications: They had all differentiated between posts on message boards which had contributed to the development of dialogue and had sought to develop interaction with others and those messages which were 'monologues' and had therefore not encouraged interaction.

In the period from October to December the students had been divided into seven groups on the message board for practical reasons. Katrin, my partner teacher, and I had felt that 30 students (14 from Ireland and 16 from Germany) interacting together in one group could lead to confusion and hinder the development of dialogue. For this reason, pairs of Irish students were placed with groups of three or four German students in separate threads on the board. It was made clear to students where they should post by one of the teachers creating the opening of each new thread on the board. These new threads would have a title such as 'Group 1: Weeks 3-4'.

In total 202 posts were made by both sets of students on the message board during that time. The Irish posted 62 of these messages, while the German group authored 140.

Most of these posts were made by students individually, but in the case of the Irish students who often posted their messages during their class time, students sometimes worked in pairs and posted one message under both names. The table 5.7 below shows the number of posts which each of the seven groups made on the five topics during this period. The average number of posts for each group was 28, however the table reveals that two groups were distinctly above average (groups 1 and 6) while two others were distinctly below average (groups 3 and 5). It will be seen later whether these differences in number of posts would be related to the type of posts in each group and their content.

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
Members	Ger: Laura-Dorti Irl: Brian & Donal	Ger: Seb, Manuel, Sara. Irl: Liz & Mike	Ger: Nina, Julia. Irl: Marie & Amalia	Ger: Sara, Nadine, Irl: Fiona & Aoife	Ger: NathalieJenny. Irl: Alec & Susan	Ger: Patrick, Nicole. Irl: Dara & Paul	Ger: Nadine, Christine. Irl: Niamh and Michelle.
Thread 1	15	10	4	6	5	14	10
Thread 2	4	4	5	4	2	4	3
Thread 3	6	5	0	2	3	10	3
Thread 4	11	5	6	7	4	16	8
Thread 5	7	4	0	3	2	7	4
Total	43	28	15	21	16	51	28
Percentage of total	21%	13%	7%	10%	12%	25%	13%

Table 5.7: Number of Posts per Group

(Average number of posts per group: 28)

5.6.2.2 Classifying Content for Intercultural Learning

Reading through the message board, a broad classification of the types of functions which the posts are 'carrying out' becomes clear. A look at one typical thread will help to highlight these main functions. The extracts are taken from the second thread of the first discussion group and was initially based on the German students' reactions and inquiries following their work on the web unit on modern Irish history. The first post comes from Dorti, a German student:

```
Author: Dorti
Date:   11-04-02 21:17

Hello everyone,

Having read just too little about Irish history, I think the question of
independence is the most interesting one for me. It seems most countries in
Europe want to go their own ways these days and there's a lot of wars over it.
Seems a little contrary to the European idea, but I guess it's understandable.
(Although we're going the other way. But noone here's too happy about that
either.)
Now what about your own independence movement, the Easter rebellion and the
Anglo-Irish-treaty and so on. Is that taught at school, or at home? Do you
really talk about it freely, like you would talk about sports or something?
And what about those heroes like Michael Collins? Do you really have, like,
shrines at home? Or do you just know that they exist?
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.3

In this post, the German student greets the other members and immediately recognises her ignorance of this week's subject ("Having read just too little about Irish history..."). She then explains briefly why the topic of the independence movement in Ireland interests her. Finally, she then writes a list of related questions which she expects the Irish to answer in their post next week. She herself does not explore the topic from a German perspective and does not discuss the concept of historical heroes in her own country. The next post in the thread came from the Irish group:

```
Author: Brian und Donal
Date:    11-05-02 19:37


Hallo Dorti,

man darf hierzulande stolz auf unseren Freiheitskampf sein, und das
Thema ist überhaupt nicht ein heikles; es existiert auch heute kein
schlechtes Verhältnis zu den Britten (mit der Ausnahme ein paar
verrückter Teile der Gesellschaft, z.B. die Sinn Féin Angehörigen).
Man weiß, das das Ganze in der Vergangenheit liegt und man es hinter
sich stellen kann. Die Nationalhelden wie Pearse, Connolly usw
erscheinen manchmal auf Briefmarken und Szenen von dem Osteraufstand
werden im Hauptpost (GPO) auf der Wand dargestellt. Keiner richtet
sich dagegen - man kann stolz auf das eigene Land sein, ohne damit
fanatisch zu sein. Ich meinerseits kenne niemand, der Pearsebilder auf
der eigene Wand haengt - obwohl es solche Leute wahrscheinlich gibt.

Was ich gern wissen wuerde: wie steht es jetzt zwischen Ost-und West
Deutschland? Gibt es noch Vorurteile, die beide Seiten zueinander
haben? Ist es schwierig, als Ostdeutsche/r im Westen zu leben? Sind
die "neue" Bundeslaendern jetzt auf ein hoeheres oekonomisches Niveau
gekommen? Darueber weiss man in Irland nicht viel!
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.4

The answer comes from the two Irish members of the group who are writing together. Their post includes both factual information about the independence movement in Ireland ("Die Nationalhelden wie Pearse, Connolly usw erscheinen manchmal auf Briefmarken und Szenen von dem Osteraufstand werden im Hauptpost (GPO) auf der Wand dargestellt.") as well as their own personal perspective on the events of that time in Ireland ("-man kann stolz auf das eigene Land sein, ohne damit fanatisch zu sein."). Finally, the students appear to change the topic completely and, in a new paragraph, ask their German partners to answer various questions on the topic of East and West Germany since the reunification. The opening phrase of the second paragraph ("Was ich gern wissen wuerde:") appears to give the impression that the writer(s) believe that they have completed their part of the bargain and now, in return, expect the Germans to give them some information in return. The questions for their partners come, as did those of Dorti, without any personal perspectives on the topic itself. The Irish expect the Germans to speak about the topic of German unification, but are themselves unwilling to comment on the topic. Their questions are to receive two answers:

```
Hi Brian and Donal,

Although I am not in your group I would like to answer your questions.
I hope it's O.K.

I think your questions concerning the relationship between East and
West Germany are not really easy to answer. To my mind people have
different attitudes concerning it.
I want try to tell you a bit about the experiences I have made.

First of all it may help you to know that I was born in the former GDR
and that I and my parents left the country in 1989, one year before
the reunification followed. My parents were completely against this
socialist system there and we finally got the permission to leave the
country after 3 years of hopeful waiting.

When the borders were opened one year later, many of the people who
supported the communist regime for a long time, suddenly moved to West
Germany because now they could see their advantages there.
I have made the experinece that such people aren't liked because they
are 'false' in some way.

But certainly there were also many people who didn't get the
permission for leaving the country and those were really happy when
they had the chance to move to West Germany then. So, those people who
protested against the socialist state and made clear that they didn't
support it are really accepted and in some way admired here, because
people can imagine that life there was really hard if you didn't
accept the system. (I don't know how far you are familiar with this
topic, but if you have any further questions concerning the difficult
life there, please ask!)
I hope I was able to supply some useful answers.
Bye, Verena
```

Forum Posting Extract 5.5

Verena's answer to the questions on East and West Germany is in many ways similar to Brian and Donal's own post. We can see Verena dealing with the topic in hand by combining factual information about the migration from East to West Germany with her own personal perspective on this issue: "I have made the experience that such people aren't liked because they are 'false' in some way". At no stage during her post does Verena refer to the Irish students' explanations of nationalism in Ireland, nor does she offer her own reactions to this issue. Like the Irish post before hers, she provides information on her own culture for her partners but she does not reflect on the information which they have posted about her target culture, nor does she compare German and Irish perspectives in any way. However, this is not to be the case in the final message in this thread:

```
Author: Dorti
Date:   11-11-02 16:58

First of all thanks for the info. 🌐

Second: We don't have any heroes over here. No one I could think of.
For us the 20th century is a rather dubious period in history. Not too
much heroic stuff we've done... That's why, as a German, you're always
irritated if someone puts pictures up the wall or waves flags or stuff
like that. It's still not completely normal over here. Nationalism,
even with the positive aspects it doubtless has, is eyed suspiciously.
(And rightfully so, for us at least.)

Third, the question about Eastern Germany. That's a difficult one, and
I've even asked e few people. The truth is: I *personnally* haven't
given any thought to this for quite some time. It's become routine,
somehow. And also, I don't really know a lot about the East, to be
honest. The only time I ever was there was in 1987, or something.
(Ironically!) Economically, I don't know. I guess it's getting better,
but at a very slow rate. Unemployment is probably still high, and now
they've all been flooded, too. It's really not fair, come to think
about it.. *sigh* But prejudices: Yeah, somehow, probably, the usual.
The only really prominent part of that is the dialects they have.
Saxon, for example. You should hear that! *hehehe* But then Bavarian
is funny too. Actually, I guess everyone talks funny except us. *grin*
And since we're pretty far west, we don't meet many people from
Eastern G. here. I guess they all get stuck somewhere in Berlin or
some part of the country that I've never seen... So, we don't know
anything either. Or at least I don't. I could fake it, but that's
silly.

Now, a question I have: is you anthem really that difficult? Our
teacher (who is Irish) said, no one knows it, except for the last two
lines. Actually I'm JUST looking it up and it - er - "Le gean ar
Ghaedhil chun" - what? See, most people here don't even know the
German anthem and that's in plain German. How do you actually learn
this? I mean, that's difficult, isn't it? Does anybody know it? Do you
speak Gaelic? It has so many consonants. No offense! 😊

Be seeing you
Dorti
```

Forum Posting Extract 5.6

This second post from Dorti is quite different from the two which it preceded. She begins the message in a social manner, thanking her partners and using an emoticon. Following this, she immediately moves on to react to the information which the Irish had posted about their attitudes to nationalistic symbols. By comments such as "as a German, you're always irritated if someone puts pictures up the wall or waves flags or stuff like that. It's still not completely normal over here..." she is directly contrasting German and Irish perspectives on one particular cultural practice. By doing so, she is giving the Irish group an opportunity to see a foreign perspective on something which they might usually understand as quite normal. Implicitly, she also explains why Germans would approach such cultural behaviour differently to the Irish ("For us the

20th century is a rather dubious period in history. Not too much heroic stuff we've done...”). The second paragraph of her post returns to the usual approach of giving her cultural perspective on some aspect of her home culture. In this case, the Irish are told, among other things, about West German reactions to East German dialects.

Finally, she closes her message with more questions, in an attempt, perhaps, to keep up the momentum of the exchange and to encourage the Irish to respond. However, the question is not straight forward and it is clear that it is coming from a German perspective. She asks the Irish to tell her about their attitudes to their national anthem, but not before explaining to them that "most people here don't even know the German anthem and that's in plain German". In other words, the Irish are being encouraged to talk about their main anthem but taking into account the background of their German partners.

Analysing the content of these and the other posts between the German and Irish students, four main elements or functions can be identified. Each of these elements and their contribution to the intercultural learning process will be looked at now in some detail. Following that, the frequency of each element will be examined.

Firstly, a great many of the texts contain elements of social communication. This may involve speech acts such as greetings and apologies, as well as jokes and references to 'off-task' topics. These comments usually came at the beginning of the post or at the end when the students had finished writing about their main topic. It is clear that such comments were an attempt on the behalf of the students to develop a sense of community with their on-line partners and, as such, they make an important contribution to the intercultural learning process. Müller-Hartmann warns that a relationship of trust and respect must exist between learners before they can be expected to open up to the foreign perspectives which their partner brings with them and I would suggest that such social communication was a contribution to this relationship of trust:

> "Eine Interaktion auf der Basis von elektronischen Briefen kann somit u.a. gestützt werden durch das Wissen um Aspekte wie die richtige Anrede, das Verabschieden, das Eingehen auf die Partnerin durch Nachfragen, durch Aussprechen von Einverständnis, Lob und Kritik." (1999a: 166)

The second element which posts tended to include was factual and personal information about the writers' home culture. As can be seen in the second and third posts from the thread above, students tended to give their partners factual information about the chosen topic in their home culture and then they would go on to give their personal experience of it. As was seen in the previous study, this content can also be seen as an important contribution to the learning process in cultural studies as it allowed learners to find out factual information about each others' cultures and also enabled them to see how this information was interpreted and experienced by somebody from the target culture.

The third element to be identified in the messages involves students explicitly reflecting on the target culture or comparing the home and target cultures together. When students include such content they are exposing their partners to an alternative perspective on their home culture. An example of this can be seen here when Sara (from the German group) gives her opinion on what she had read about the role of women in Ireland: "I was most impressed by the fact that the Irish fought in their proclamation in 1916 not only for independence but also for the equality of mean and women and for the women's right to vote. It seems to me that the Irish were successful in their efforts because with Mary Robinson Ireland got its first woman president in 1991. In Germany we try our best to realize this but in most high places are still sitting men...". Here the Irish group are exposed to an alternative interpretation of their 1916 revolution and the role of women in public life in Ireland is brought into contrast with the situation in Germany. I would suggest that such content is likely to make both writer and reader more aware of their own cultures. The writer (in this case Sara from Germany) has engaged in the reflective process of comparing the situation in Ireland with her homeland, while the Irish readers of this post are indirectly challenged to reflect again on their own history following this German interpretation of events. This element appears to be quite reminiscent of Christian's (1997) 'talking writing' and Lamy and Goodfellow's (1999) reflective dialogues which were seen in section 2.3.4 to be particularly beneficial to the on-line learning process as they involve a direct engagement with others and a detailed negotiation of meaning as opposed to simply exchanging information.

Finally, the last element to be identified in the posts are questions and requests for more information. They carried out two main functions. On a practical level, the questions served to keep the interaction going and facilitated interaction in a context where neither group knew very well what the other needed to know. By asking questions at the end of their messages, students signalled to the others how they could help each other. On the level of intercultural learning, the questions encouraged students to reflect on some aspects of their own culture which they might, until then, have taken for granted. This is especially true in the case of questions, such as those in Dorti's second post above, which were framed in a way which gave the reader a point of reference from the other culture. In Dorti's question, she first of all states how the national anthem is viewed in Germany and then asks the Irish students to talk about the Irish perspective. The Irish students thereby automatically have a starting point for their answer. An overview of all four elements and examples from the posts can be seen below in table 5.8.

Element of Post	Description	Sample Extract
1	Introducing, apologising, joking (i.e. social communication)	**[A German student writes]** Hi again, it always surprises me how much Manuel writes (and the times he tends to write at 😜). …Hey, I am beginning to thoroughly enjoy this dialogue! Let's keep it running this way, it's a lot of fun! CU,
2	Reporting factual or personal information about one's own culture	**[A German student writes]** First of all it may help you to know that I was born in the former GDR and that I and my parents left the country in 1989, one year before the reunification followed. My parents were completely against this socialist system there and we finally got the permission to leave the country after 3 years of hopeful waiting. When the borders were opened one year later, many of the people who supported the communist regime for a long time, suddenly moved to West Germany because now they could see their advantages there. I have made the experience that such people aren't liked because they are 'false' in some way.
3	Reflecting on target culture or explicitly comparing home and target cultures	**[A German student writes]** When we read that there are a lot of photographs, for example of Michael Collins or somebody else in the pubs, etc., we were really astonished. It seems as if Irish people were very proud of their 'heroes' and their history. Maybe very proud to be Irish. Is this reality or just an image of being Irish? In Germany you would never find somebody with pictures of historical persons or something like that. Even putting out the German flag for example for soccer championships etc. is still kind of controversial because of our bad recent history.
4	Asking questions to members of target culture	**[A German student writes]** The questions that arise for me from this thoughts concerning our discussion, are: To what extent are historical events present in your every day life? In the module it said that it is common, for example, that portraits of famous historical persons, such as (Michael Collins) can be seen in pubs. Is this true, and are you

		aware of it, or is it so normal to you that you don't even think of the history represented by those pictures? I guess that due to the long history of struggling for independence in Ireland the intention towards "national pride" and such issues might be another than in Germany, with its history. What do you think?

Table 5.8: Classification of Posts according to Cultural Content
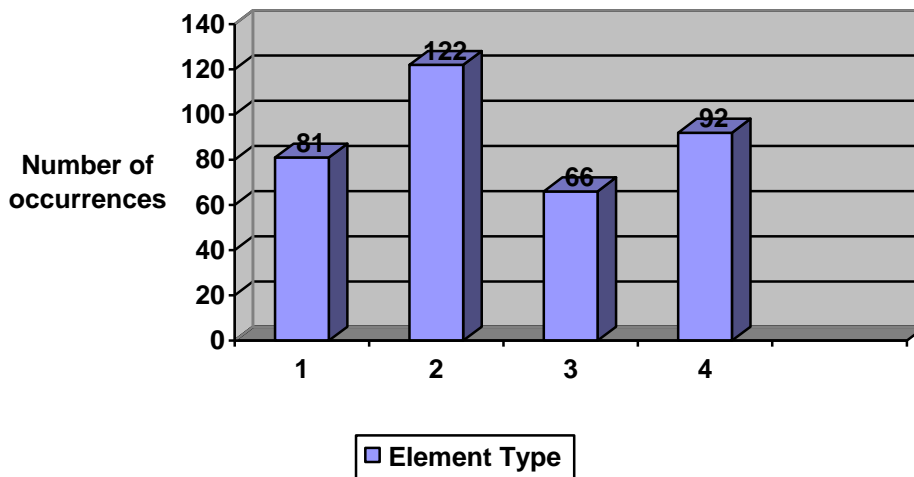
Fig. 5.9 Number of occurrences of each element (October-November)

Obviously, each post sent to the message board contained a combination of the four elements described above. However, when each component's regularity is calculated, it becomes clear that the third component, reflection on the target culture, is seriously underrepresented on the message board. Figure 5.9 above illustrates that while social communication can be found 81 times, reports of information on the home culture appear 122 times and students ask questions or request information 92 times on the message board, there are only 66 attempts by students to give their perspective on the target culture or to compare some aspect of both cultures. Further analysis of the posts (presented in table 5.9 below) reveal that 68% of all posts were made up of some combination of the first, second and fourth elements. The third element only appears in 32% of the messages. Furthermore, if the statistics are looked at according to nationality, it can be seen that a mere 24% of the Irish messages contain any reflection on German culture or any form of comparison of the German and Irish cultures.

.

	All Nationalities	Irish Posts	German Posts
Total Posts	202	62	140
Percentage		31%	69%
Combinations of elements 1, 2 and 4	136	47	89
Percentage	68%	76%	64%
Postings containing element 3	66	15	51
Percentage	32%	24%	36%

Table 5.9 Frequency of Element Combinations in Posts

I would consider the lack of this element an important drawback of the on-line dialogue in this exchange. Messages which were limited to combinations of 1,2 and 4 risk leading to an unreflective exchange of information rather than an active negotiation of meaning. Students are simply delivering information about their home culture to their partners but are not questioning it in any way themselves and are not trying to contrast why similar products or practices are considered differently in each country. Essentially, an on-line exchange which involves mostly elements 1,2 and 4 is very similar to older approaches to Landeskunde which focussed on transferring information from the textbook to the learner. In this case, the textbook is simply being replaced by a group of native speakers. Of course, learners have the opportunity to take the input they have received about the target culture (i.e. element 2) and to discuss it and compare it with their own culture in their contact classes with their teacher. This is generally what happened on a regular basis with the German group. Nevertheless, the lack of critical engagement and dialogue in the message board was undoubtedly a missed opportunity for both sets of students as it meant that neither group were encouraged to reflect on their home culture as much as they could have done in this context.

The model shown below (fig. 5.10 adapted from Bechtel, 2001) which depicts the role of insider and outsider perspectives in an intercultural exchange may help to illustrate how the lack of the third element hinders the development of intercultural learning in this context. When students fail to provide their perspective on the target culture (i.e. in the model below the 'outsider perspectives'), a vital part of the process of intercultural learning breaks down. Bechtel puts it in the following way:

"Die Darstellung der jeweiligen Innen- und Aussenperspektiven ist die Voraussetzung dafür, einen Perspektivenwechsel zu vollziehen, d.h. sich in die jeweilige Perspektive des anderen hineinzuversetzen, die Perspektive des Gegenübers einzunehmen. Dies kann sich sowohl auf die Innenperspektive als auch die Aussenperspektive meines Gegenübers beziehen." (2001:277-278)

The problem in this particular exchange is that a vital part of this process – the outsider perspectives of both groups – did not appear regularly and, consequently, made the task of understanding the other perspective more difficult.
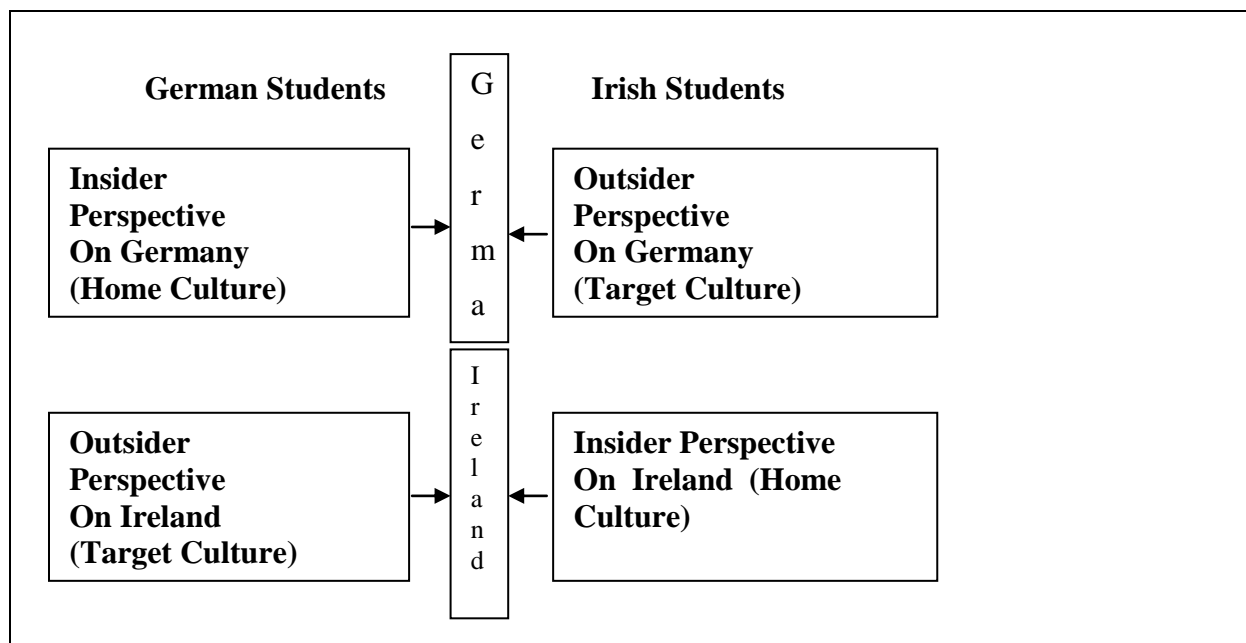
Fig. 5.10 Model of Cultural Perspectives for Intercultural Exchanges (Adapted from Bechtel, 2001)

5.6.2.3 Explaining On-line Behaviour

The question which now arises is why did the messages (in particular those from the Irish students) tend to lack this critical reflection and comparison? The answer to this may lie in the goals which both sets of students brought to the exchange. During the first week of the exchange, most of the messages were characterised by personal introductions and general commentaries on Ireland's Celtic Tiger and the problems of poverty in both countries. However, one comment by two Irish students does stand out from the others:

```
Irland ist ein kleines Land und Dublin eine intime Stadt und es ist nicht
moeglich, blind zum Elend der Unglücklichen zu sein. Obdachslosen stehen
noch auf der Strasse, eine zunehmende Zahl finden es schwierig, ein Job zu
kriegen - und Einwanderer, von denen man hier staendig mehr sieht, finden
es viel leichter, ein Haus usw zu bekommen - was viele Iren veraergert.

Denkt man eigentlich in Deutschland, dass alle Iren arme Bauern sind? Tut
mir leid, dass ich das Frage, aber so einen stereotypischen Eindrueck
bekommt man manchmal von Euch. Es scheint mir auch, dass die nach Irland-
kommende Deutschen immer sehr ueberrascht sind, wenn sie das Land
eigentlich sehen. Denkt man eigentlich in Deutschland, dass alle Iren arme
Bauern sind? Tut mir leid, dass ich das Frage, aber so einen
stereotypischen Eindruck bekommt man manchmal von Euch.
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.7

This is of interest as it reveals a great deal about the self-image which the Irish group had going into this exchange. Many of the Irish had spent time in German speaking countries and they appear to have returned with the belief that the German view of Ireland was still the stereotypical one of 'The Quiet Man' and Heinrich Böll's 'Irisches Tagebuch'. The Irish fear that the Germans in this exchange would have a similar image of them is clear when they ask "Denkt man eigentlich in Deutschland, dass alle Iren arme Bauern sind?". In an e-mail in mid-December this view was confirmed to me by Katrin, their teacher. She pointed out that the Irish group were frustrated by the way they were perceived by the rest of the world as being "country folk". She went on: "They want the world to know that they live in a modern capital (personal correspondence with the author, 3.12.02)". She returned to the importance of this issue for the Irish students in an end-of-term interview which she carried out with me via e-mail: "I think they [the Irish students] felt good about trying to get Germans away from Irish stereotypes and tell them about Irish reality" (personal correspondence with the author, 14.03.03). Therefore, informing the German group about 'the real modern Ireland' was obviously one of the main priorities of the Irish group and, I would suggest, this may have been a major factor in determining that their messages mainly focussed on reporting about their own culture (element 2) rather than exploring their understanding of Germany. Ardagh, in his review of modern Irish society, tries to explain these inner-looking tendencies in the Irish in the following way:

> "...through foreign holidays, television and much else, the Irish have become much more aware of the outside world. Yet they also remain so very self-preoccupied, more than the British… . They are not at all xenophobic, but curiously self-conscious about being Irish: put them in some foreign context, and they will relate everything back to Ireland, as if reluctant to focus on other matters for their own sake… . Maybe this self-

referring vision is the result of a small island nation's age-old concern to protect its own identity." (1995: 341)

This was repeatedly demonstrated in the course of the exchange as the Irish quickly moved to dispel any wrong impressions which the Germans might have about Ireland. When the Germans referred to an Irish newspaper article which they had read in the course about Irish people becoming more overweight, the idea was angrily rejected on the message board. Similarly, when the German student Julia described the Irish as "uninformed rather than intolerant" in regard to immigration and racism, she received the following reply from one of her Irish partners:

```
Was ich Julia fragen wollte: Wie kommst Du darauf, dass "most Irish
are uninformed" in Bezug auf Auslaendern? Man lernt hier viel in der
Schule ueber Auslaendern und wie schlimm der Rassismus ist. Es war
schon so, als ich in der Grundschule war, bevor es sogar Einwanderer
gab. Viele Europaern denken, dass wir Auslaendern nicht nehmen werden
koennen, weil wir ein so reaktionaeres und engstirniges Volk sind;
aber das ist nicht der Fall, und es zeigt, wie wenig unsere
europaeische Nachbarn ueber UNSERES Land eigentlich gelernt haben!
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.8

Another German student, Verena, also reported in one of her interviews being feeling criticised by one of the Irish group for not being suitably informed about his country: "there was one of them who was really astonished that we don't know much about Ireland. He sounded almost insulted and said 'It seems we don't know a lot about each other'". To place this in the context of Byram's model of ICC, it would appear that many of the Irish students needed to develop their attitudes of curiosity and openness. Byram describes one of the attitude-related objectives as being "willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment (1997: 50)". It is clear from the examples above that the Irish eagerness to get across their interpretation of Irish culture meant that they were not particularly open to alternative perspectives on their home culture. Furthermore, this meant perhaps that they felt it was their priority to offer their perspectives on German cultural phenomena.

The German students, on the other hand, had felt more comfortable with the idea of exploring their perceptions of Ireland and comparing the two societies on-line and this is shown in the more regular occurrence of element three in their posts. This was due, perhaps, to the comparative approach which was practised in their contact classes and also due to the fact that their course was based primarily on their exploration of Irish

culture. As a result, the Germans appeared quite at home giving their impressions of what they were reading about Ireland and then waiting for the Irish to correct these impressions if they were incorrect. To achieve this goal, the German students often displayed an explorative and expressive style in their posts which may have appeared quite confrontational to the outsider. The following is an example of a German post which includes the German students giving their opinions on events in Ireland (i.e. element three):

```
Author: Anja and Nina
Date:   11-18-02 14:25
Hello everybody!
We just read this week's module which was about the "Celtic Tiger". We must
confess that we were not that interested first because we don´t like this
economic stuff. But actually it was quite interesting. The economic
development during the last 10 years must have been amazing! Did anything
change in your families because of the Celtic Tiger? Do you have a better
living- standard now because it is easier to find a job?
It's not easy for Germans to think of Ireland as a country with such a good
economy and high technologies. Most Germans still have these romantic
pictures in their minds when they think of your country. You know, this
green-pastures-with-sheep-stuff. But maybe it's just because our economic
development is contrary.
It was also said in the module that on the one hand there are a lot of jobs
but on the other hand that there is a lot of racism in Ireland. People come
to your country and would like to work there but they are not welcome. Have
you ever heard of this or have you ever made such an experience? Did
anything like this happened in your region recently?
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.9

This style is similar to that used by students in Essen and Michigan in the *Cultura* message board in chapter four, in which students would present their stereotypes and theories about the foreign culture and then wait for these to be corrected or confirmed by their partners. In this case, the students' explanation of the German view of Ireland is quite candid and perhaps confirmed the Irish fears of how their country was seen in Germany. Interestingly, their statement "It's not easy for Germans to think of Ireland as a country with such a good economy and high technologies. Most Germans still have these romantic pictures in their minds…" is actually the perception which the Irish had set out to change in the exchange. However, while the Irish might not have liked this sort of commentary on their home culture, the Germans appeared to believe that this honest reporting of stereotypes and prejudices about the other culture was part of the learning process. Manuel explains this quite clearly in the following interview extract:

Manuel: Everyone has these prejudices, actually you don't like them, but maybe we need them. This is a way to try and change it. I have this prejudice, what ones do you have? I think its quite important that these things are in a dialogue so that prejudice can be a little bit weakened.

However, while the Irish concentrated on achieving their goal of destroying the stereotypes and disinformation about Ireland which they felt their German partners had brought with them to the exchange, their strong focus on Ireland meant that the Germans were not able to find out more about Irish perspectives on Germany, something which they were very interested in. Consequently, some of the German group began to perceive this as a lack of interest in German culture on the part of the Irish. In fig. 5.11 below, 46 % of the German group reported now being satisfied with the level of interest which the Irish group showed in German culture. Furthermore, the following graph (fig. 5.12) confirms that a large majority of the German group had considered this an important aspect of the exchange.
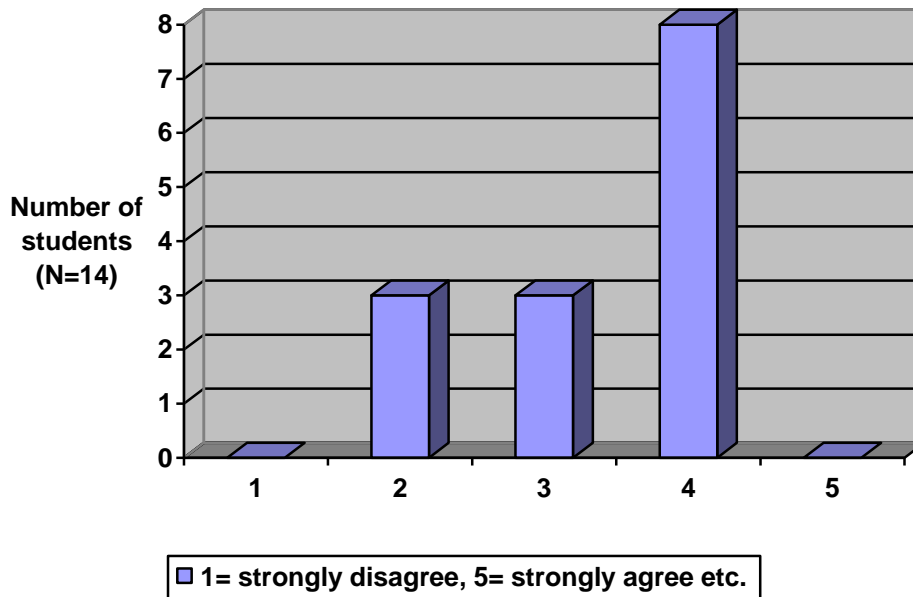
Fig. 5.11 I felt the Irish group showed sufficient interest in my culture during the exchange
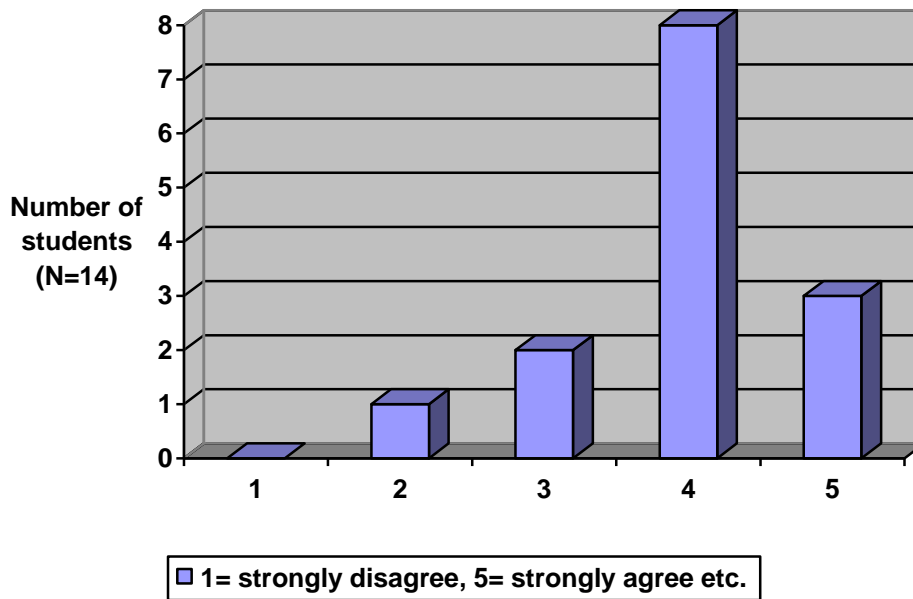
Fig. 5.12 It was important for me that the Irish showed an interest in my home culture

The Germans' interest in finding out how Germany was perceived in Ireland was obvious on practically all of the threads on the message board. The following are some examples of how the Germans tried to find out more of the Irish image of Germany:

```
I would really like to know what you learn in your course about
Germany and the Germans and if your image has changed since starting
this course.
```

```
Can you understand that it is after 50 years still so difficult to
show the love to our country? What do you think about it? Is it just a
German problem or do other nations connect Germany still with the
Second World War?
```

```
So what ever you would like to talk about, just ask us 😊I think it
would be interesting for us Germans to get to know, in what Irish
people are interested concerning Germany.
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.10

The conclusions which the German's drew when these questions went unanswered can be seen in the following interview and questionnaire extracts:

Nathalie: It's quite interesting to have this conversation with the Irish students. But sometimes I'm a little bit disappointed because it seems as if the Irish aren't sooo interested in things about Germany.

Question: How do you find the exchange with the Irish group?
Jenny: I think its quite nice but I think it's a pity that there aren't so many people from the Irish side to answer. And I think the Irish aren't so interested

in topics about the Germans, I think. Sometimes they don't even react to our questions about their view of Germany.
Question: Why do you think this is the case?
Jenny: I don't know, maybe they are just not interested. They never ask any questions. Maybe they know nothing about Germany.

Nina: They wont ask questions when they write, I always have to ask the questions so I can say what it is like in Germany. Sometimes I don't know about what I should write.

These members of the German group were obviously disappointed at the lack of interest which the Irish students had shown in Germany and it is interesting to note that these three students who had been most sensitive about this point (Nathalie, Jenny and Nina) belonged to the two groups which produced the lowest number of messages (groups 3 and 5). It is perhaps fair to speculate that this perceived lack of interest on the part of the Irish meant that the German students in these groups were less motivated to write messages and, as a result, interaction in these groups failed to develop to any substantial degree.

In previous research based on an e-mail exchange between Spanish and British students (O'Dowd, 2003), I had found that, in order to bring about rich intercultural exchanges, students need to have opportunities to talk about and explore their own culture with a receptive and interested audience. If learners feel that this is not the case and their partners are not interested in their culture then the success of the exchange will be limited and it may hinder intercultural learning. The example of the three German students in this case would appear to confirm these findings.

5.6.2.4 Learning from the Message Board Exchange

One of the main conclusions that can be drawn from practically all the in-depth reports of on-line intercultural exchanges is that it is very unlikely that teachers and their students will ever be involved in a 'perfect' exchange. Most exchanges will inevitably encounter some impediments which will hinder learning in some way. Limited access to computers, differing timetables, differing goals and cultural misunderstandings are all issues which have been pointed out in the literature. Nevertheless, this does not mean that learners will not develop their intercultural competence simply because their exchange encountered problems. Indeed, these practical problems in many ways represent the reality of intercultural communication in general and Belz (2001) suggests that teachers involved in e-mail exchanges can do well

to expose their students to these day-to-day differences between two groups of people in different cultures. Dealing with the reality that the two groups involved in an exchange have different college timetables and curricular demands or the fact that they both have different personal goals which they want to achieve in the exchange is, in itself, an important part of the intercultural learning process.

Despite the problems which this particular exchange encountered in regard to the content delivered by the students, the German group definitely demonstrated in their interviews, questionnaires and learner diaries that the on-line exchange had helped them to develop aspects of their ICC and had made them more aware of what intercultural communication involved. To demonstrate this, some interview extracts will now be looked at. The first aspect of ICC which students appear to have become aware of through the exchange was the necessary attitudes of curiosity and openness to other perspectives (Byram, 1997a: 52). This is clear in the following extracts:

> **Q:** Based on your experience on the message board, what do you feel is necessary to communicate successfully with members of other cultures?
>
> **Verena:** I think you should take into account some bits of writing, like first introduce yourself, ask them some questions.
> **Manuel:** Everyone has these prejudices, actually you don't like them, maybe we need them. This is a way to try and change it…I have this prejudice, what ones do you have? I think its quite important that these things are in a dialogue so that prejudice can be a little bit weakened.
> **Seb:** Yes, it is a good chance to get rid of these things.
> **Manuel:** I remember in some posting I said, if there are some prejudices that I don't know then they should tell me because I like it actually to hear about these things.
>
> **Patrick:** you need to have a feeling for the language…a good Menschenkenntnis…you have to be interested in them.
> **Christine:** You have to think about people, what they might expect from you
> **Patrick:** I try to imagine what they are like, so what type of people are they, when you read between the lines you can see if they are more shy or open.
>
> **Nina:** Students need a certain personality. They should be open for other societies and they should be persistent and don't give up so early…daran bleiben… and should be interested in the topic and should have opinion that they should learn everything about the other culture as they will be teachers..
> **Q:** And how do they do this?
> **Nina:** I think you should be open and interested and –it sounds so wow - letting it into you. I think one has to think of his own situation and his own culture to compare, to understand Ireland and I think to understand themselves better.

Here, we see Manuel and Sebastian recognising that on-line exchange and dialogue can be a good opportunity to discover other perspectives on cultural practices and thereby get rid of their own stereotypes and prejudices ("I think its quite important that these things are in a dialogue so that prejudice can be a little bit weakened."). Patrick and Christine became more aware that their foreign partners may be approaching the exchange with different expectations and goals than their own ("You have to think about people, what they might expect from you") and Nina expresses in a very enthusiastic and genuine manner the importance of being open to other interpretations ("They should be open for other societies") and being willing to use these alternative perspectives to look again at one's own culture ("one has to think of his own situation and his own culture to compare, to understand Ireland and I think to understand themselves better").

The following extract from an interview with Laura reflects how the on-line exchange had led her to reassess what intercultural learning meant for her and the role that cultural knowledge played in this definition:

> **Laura:** Its about thinking. Its about getting information about another country and its people and then thinking about the differences between the two countries and even more its thinking about the relations between the two countries.
> **Q:** Where does this definition come from?
> **Laura:** It's a development. Before this course I had never thought of it before. I was never confronted with intercultural learning. Now I have made the experience and I have watched what can happen when you exchange your opinion with people from other countries.

Her understanding of how knowledge about the other culture should be employed to think "about the differences between the two countries" and to think about "the relations between the two countries" reflects very well Byram's aim of bringing learners to be aware of the relationship between the home and target cultures (1997a: 51). For Laura, information about the target culture is no longer sufficient in itself (as previous approaches to *Landeskunde* might have suggested). Instead, cultural knowledge has to be employed to come to a better understanding of how her home culture relates to the target culture.

Finally, many of the interviews revealed a growing awareness of the skills of discovery and interaction which are necessary in situations of intercultural contact. As the following interview extracts show, students had been particularly sensitised to the ability of how to elicit information from their on-line partners:

> **Q:** Based on your experience on the message board, what do you feel is necessary to communicate successfully with members of other cultures?
>
> **Nadine:** Maybe asking questions so they can say something on their own and that's important so its not that we are writing, writing, writing and not exchanging any questions for each other.
>
> **Nathalie:** It's like writing a letter, you have to ask how the other is, don't ask 10 questions one after another, say your own opinion as well so the other person gets something from it as well.
> **Jenny:** Sometimes it is hard to express yourself, for example when you are talking about National Pride and these topics, in case you will be misunderstood. Especially when you are writing in English. I am always so afraid, that's why I use a thousand smileys…[laughs]
> **Nathalie:** Yeah, on-line everything just seems to sound so dramatic somehow. If you were talking normally, you would use a gesture but when you just write it, it can come across bad. And if you have to wait for a week, then it can really be misinterpreted.
> **Q:** So how do you avoid this?
> **Nathalie:** Smileys. And you think more about how you say something. You think more about how it is going to be understood by the other.

Here we see German students becoming aware that finding out about another culture requires both giving as well as getting information. However, it is interesting to note that another aspect of intercultural competence emerges here which Byram does not appear to have covered explicitly in his model. Both Nathalie and Jenny highlight the difficulties which they had in adequately expressing their own perspectives and understanding about their home culture to their foreign partners. The debate which Jenny refers to in her interview (how national pride was considered in both countries) was one which appeared to trouble the whole German group a great deal. In our class discussion about the topic, many echoed Jenny and Nathalie's frustration at being unable to explain their feelings about this aspect of their culture and to give an accurate German perspective to their partners. In the discussion in class, Dorti voiced her annoyance that she was unable to get the Irish group to appreciate how Germany's recent history still influenced modern German life: "How can you explain it? They don't seem to understand that history is always there for us". Nevertheless, she went on later that week to make a post to the board on the topic when an Irish student asked her

if the current economic crisis in Germany was similar to that of the Weimar Republic in the 1930's:

```
But the main problem with this [speaking about Weimar] is (btw) that
we *always* think of the Nazis when you mention things like that. For
us, it's EVER-present. We just had a politician this year, Möllemann
(heard of that?), who tried to do his election campaign by criticising
Jews. There was much response. And that worries us. So, if you ask
something about the 30ies, even with economy in mind, we do think
about that *one* topic. What do you think about that?
```
Forum Posting Extract 5.11

Should this ability to communicate to others one's own understanding of the home culture be treated as a separate objective of the skills of discovery and interaction within his model of intercultural communicative competence? Byram does refer to the ability of being able to "interact with interlocutors from a different country and culture, taking into consideration the degree of one's existing familiarity with the country and culture and the extent of difference between one's own and the other" (1997a: 53) and this, perhaps, does loosely cover the idea of being able to effectively communicate one's own cultural perspective. Nevertheless, if one of Byram's objectives involves *eliciting* from members of the target culture the concepts and values behind products and practices *in their culture* (1997a: 52), then I would suggest that the ability *to express* the concepts and values which are behind *the home* culture's products and practices is equally important. Furthermore, Byram's critical cultural awareness highlights the need for learners to make their own cultural values explicit. Therefore, an important part of this process must be the ability to communicate one's own values successfully to members of the target culture without causing offence or misunderstanding. In the area of ethnography, Spradley refers to this as 'translation competence': "the ability to translate the meanings of one culture into a form that is appropriate to another culture" (1979: 19). Spradley maintains most of us exhibit this competence in our own language when we move between different dialects and communicate appropriately in different social situations. However, the intercultural speaker is required to go a step further and communicate the meanings of one 'national' culture to another.

This ability is particularly relevant in situations which involve 'give and take' on both sides such as this educational exchange, but perhaps plays a lesser role in other situations such as ethnographic interviewing or international journalism where the flow of information is usually more one way. Nevertheless, it is an important ability as many

intercultural speakers will find themselves in situations where they need to express to members of other cultures the importance or significance which an event or a document has in their home culture. Most language learners who have spent time abroad will know the feeling of asking oneself how to get across to others the many connotations and great significance which a certain time of year, event, piece of food, regional accent or tradition means to them. Very often, the basic explanations which one offers an interlocutor about a cultural product or practice simply fail to communicate their real cultural significance. Nathalie's comments confirm this: "Sometimes it is hard to express yourself, for example when you are talking about National Pride and these topics, in case you will be misunderstood". This can be particularly difficult for speakers who have to operate in a foreign language and it can be even more challenging if the interaction is taking place in an on-line environment where body language and facial expressions have to be replaced by written language and emoticons. Therefore, I would suggest the additional objective to Byram's skills of discovery and interaction may be described in the following way:

Objective: *The ability to describe the concepts and values of documents and events from one's own culture to a member of another culture and thereby support the interlocutor in developing an explanatory system of one's home culture.*

This objective would clarify that intercultural communicative competence not only requires being aware of the allusions, connotations and cultural-specific references which documents and events have in one's home culture, but also being able to effectively and clearly communicate this background to interlocutors from other cultures. Learners may achieve this by making comparisons with aspects of the interlocutor's own culture or by providing insightful examples from their home culture. By doing so, intercultural speakers will enable their interlocutor to make accurate generalisations about the shared meanings and values in their home culture.

Other writers have already attributed importance to this ability in foreign language learners. Savignon and Sysoyev (2002), in their taxonomy of sociocultural strategies, refer to the ability of "explaining features of one's own culture" (2002: 513) as well as "making analogies, oppositions, generalisations, and comparisons between facts and realities of L1 and L2 cultures" (ibid.). The fact that the ability to describe one's own home culture to a member of a foreign culture often requires using contrasts and

comparisons between both cultures means that this is related to the skills of interpreting and *relating* (Byram, 1997a: 52) as well as to those of discovery and interaction.

Of course, as with the activities of soliciting information and analysing the information they receive from their partners (see chapter four), the ability to effectively describe the meanings, beliefs and behaviour of one's own culture in on-line environments needs to be explicitly developed by the teacher in contact classes. Explaining to learners how to compare the significance of behaviour in the home culture with that in the target culture or modelling correspondence which provides examples of, for example, the home culture's national memory are examples of what teachers may do to develop this ability in learners.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter looked at a blended approach to Cultural Studies which integrated web units and an on-line intercultural exchange with regular contact classes. The aim of the course had been to exploit the three learning environments (i.e. web units, the message board and contact classes) in order to develop the various components of intercultural communicative competence. The triangulation of different sources of qualitative and quantitative data revealed the potential benefits of such blended learning environments for Cultural Studies. However, a number of findings emerged which should be taken into account when considering the organisation and content of similar courses in the future. Each of these will now be reviewed briefly.

Firstly, the importance which factual learning continues to have in courses of Cultural Studies was demonstrated. Learners were seen to need knowledge of the target culture in order to readjust their generalisations and stereotypes and to become more informed about the cultures where their target language is spoken. The fact that factual knowledge is an important aspect of cultural learning is hardly a new insight. However, in the current climate where great importance is attributed to the development of intercultural skills and attitudes, it can perhaps be seen as a timely call for balance and for a rational combination of all these elements.

Secondly, the results of this study highlighted the need to make learners aware of what Cultural Studies actually involves. As with the German class in the previous chapter, the students in this course were found to have come from an educational background which had equated *Landeskunde* with the learning of superficial facts and figures about the target culture. However, the study showed that if students can be explicitly engaged in activities which highlight the different aspects of cultural analysis and ICC, then they will be able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what culture learning entails. For this reason, it was argued that culture specific courses (i.e. courses focussing on, for example, Ireland or Britain) are a useful and important tool for language students and that the competence developed in these courses can later be applied to other learning scenarios.

Thirdly, evidence was found to suggest that such courses will help learners to become more aware of their own cultural values and perspectives. Activities which

explicitly require learners to compare both home and target culture perspectives are particularly beneficial in achieving this aim. However, it was less clear whether they were able to carry through the empathic process to its conclusion and actually achieve the metaphorical 'third place' between both cultures. As was seen in the previous chapter, the achievement of intercultural understanding is very difficult to achieve within the time limit of one semester.

The research into the message board exchange between German and Irish students revealed two important findings for on-line intercultural exchanges. Firstly, when the content of the exchange was categorised into four different elements of cultural content, it was found that an important aspect of intercultural exchange, i.e. reflection on the target culture, was underrepresented in the data. This was particularly true for the Irish content. It was suggested that, in this case, this was due to the goals which the Irish students had brought to the exchange. Their eagerness to build up an accurate and modern image of Ireland in the minds of the German partners had meant that they failed to show sufficient interest in their partners' home culture or to engage in any comparison of both cultures. This meant that at times the relationship between students in the forum bore much similarity to the relationship between students via e-mail in the previous chapter, in which students exchanged information but rarely engaged in any dialogue about what they were sending to each other.

The conclusion which can be drawn from this may be the following. Firstly, when students engage in intercultural exchanges in discussion forums, they need to be made aware of the four different cultural elements in on-line posts and they should be encouraged to include, where possible, all four of them. Once again, it is evident that interacting on-line in intercultural exchanges is not a natural skill, but one which must be explicitly developed by the teacher. It is the teacher who must clarify with the students, firstly, what their learning goals are for the exchange and, secondly, how these can best be achieved. Furthermore, students should be made aware that their partner class is coming from a different cultural background and therefore the personal goals which each group has for the exchange may be decidedly different to the others. As was seen in chapter three and as was previously pointed out by Belz (2001) and Kramsch and Thorne (2002), the sociocultural contexts in which both sides of an exchange are

located will have an important influence on on-line behaviour as well as on the outcomes of the project.

The second finding in relation to the message board exchange highlighted an important aspect of ICC which has perhaps not been attributed the attention it deserves until now. The ability of intercultural speakers to effectively express to others the significance and the meaning which they apply to aspects of their own culture is an element of ICC which Byram does not refer to directly, but it was found here to be a very challenging part of intercultural exchanges for the learners. It is therefore important that students receive training in how to provide representative examples and in how to compare and contrast their understanding of a product or practice with that of the target culture.

6. Virtual Ethnographic Interviewing

"So how can we prevent misunderstanding each other and overcome the fact that we have been trained our whole lives to react to things in a certain way? What are the skills that we need to communicate more effectively?" *Sylvia from Germany reflects on the outcome of her videoconferencing and e-mail exchange with American students.*

6.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters explored the contribution of network-based technologies to the development of ICC in the context of a general foreign language course (chapter four) and in the context of a specialised course in Cultural Studies (chapter five). This chapter looks at how technologies can be integrated with the second specialised approach to developing ICC which was reported in chapter one: ethnography for language learners. The technologies used in this particular project between German and American students were e-mail and videoconferencing. The introduction of videoconferencing here represents the only use of synchronous technology in this thesis and a considerable amount of the research in this chapter will focus on ascertaining what particular contribution this synchronous 'face-to-face' technology can make to intercultural learning. The effectiveness of applying ethnographic interviewing in a virtual environment will also be looked at in detail as this is, to the best of my knowledge, the first time foreign language learners have carried out ethnographic interviewing in an on-line context.

6.2 Ethnographic Interviewing

In the first exchange project reported in this thesis (chapter four) I identified various questioning techniques which students had employed successfully in their e-mail exchanges in order to elicit information from their partners about their home cultures. In some cases, the students had used ethnographic techniques to interview their partners even though they had probably never been introduced to the concept before. Julianna's questions on American language (section 4.4.2), for example, are very similar to questions which ethnographers may ask their informants. However, in the project reported here, the Essen students were introduced in an explicit way in the opening stages of their course to the more specialised technique of ethnographic interviewing. This was done for two reasons. Firstly, this was an attempt to establish to what extent the principles and techniques of ethnography could be applied in the context of virtual exchanges. Secondly, it was seen in the two previous case studies that students in Essen tended to bring a definition of culture with them which was somewhat superficial. Ethnography, on the other hand, highlights the anthropological definition of the term which focuses not on cultural products and practices but on the meanings which these are attributed *by members of the foreign culture*. Spradley explains:

> "we do not eliminate an interest in behaviour, customs, objects, or emotions. We have merely shifted the emphasis from these phenomena to their meaning. The ethnographer observes behaviour , but goes beyond that to observe the meaning of that behaviour. The ethnographer sees artefacts and natural objects but goes beyond them to discover what meanings people assign to these objects. The ethnographer observes and records emotional states, but goes beyond them to discover meaning of fear, anxiety, anger, and other feelings." (1979: 6)

Therefore, it was hoped that introducing learners to the principles of ethnography would make students more aware of this approach to understanding a foreign culture which stresses the *emic,* or insider, perspective and would also encourage them to develop a more in-depth and reflective approach to their interactions with their virtual partners.

As was seen in section 1.4.2.2, where the ethnographic approach for language learners was reviewed, the most common tool used in ethnography is 'participant

observation'. This requires researchers to immerse themselves in the environment of the social group which they are studying. Although the work of Byram (1999) and Roberts et. al. (2001) show how third-level students can engage in such fieldwork during periods of study abroad or teaching experience in the target culture, there are many foreign language students who will not have the opportunity to travel to the home culture. Furthermore, educators may wish to prepare students for their time abroad by developing their ethnographic skills before they leave. In these cases, carrying out participant observation among social groups in one's own culture is one practical possibility. However, the introduction of telecollaboration can allow learners to engage in ethnographic research on the target culture even though they are still based in the supportive environment of their own classrooms. In a sense, on-line ethnographic research melds together the two learning contexts of 'classroom' and 'fieldwork'.

But it is important to establish ways in which the principles of ethnography can be applied when the learners are not physically present in the social environment under study. Robinson-Stuart and Nocon suggest ethnographic interviewing as a possible option: "Unlike forms of ethnography that involve long-term participant observation in specific cultural contexts, ethnographic interviewing techniques are transportable tools for understanding an insider's perspective" (1996: 437). Ethnographic interviewing essentially involves carrying out, over a series of encounters, a series of in-depth interviews with informants from the target culture in order to explore the *emic* perspective or their natural categories of meaning (Roberts et. al., 2001; Spradley, 1979).

The main characteristics of ethnographic interviewing can be summarised in the following way. Firstly, unlike other types of interviews, ethnographers do not have a pre-planned outline of set questions which are 'imposed' on the subject. Instead, interviewers develop their line of questioning based on the information which their informant supplies to them. For this reason, a second characteristic is that ethnographic interviews usually require periods of extended contact with informants. A good deal of time is needed to establish rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewee, to identify their emic perspective and then to explore in detail the meanings which they assign to behaviour. Thirdly, ethnographic interviewing requires a great deal of what Nemetz-Robinson (1985) describes as 'creative listening'. This means paying careful

attention to what the informant is saying, expressing interest in their answers and following up on the topics and issues which they bring up.

The final key characteristic of ethnographic interviewing refers to the types of questions which the informant is asked to answer. Spradley (1979: 60) reports that there are over thirty kinds of ethnographic questions which can be asked in an interview, however he categorises them into three main types. The first category, descriptive questions, aim to gain an overview of a part of the foreign culture. These include what is known as 'grand tour' or 'bull's eye' questions which are commonly used at the beginning of interviews to begin to get an insight into the informants' world. Examples of such questions might be "Could you describe to me what you do on a normal day at your university?" or "How does it feel to be spending a semester studying abroad?". The second type of questions, structural questions, aim to gain information about how informants' structure their cultural knowledge. An example of this type of question might be "Could you tell me how the different types of schools are organised in your town?". Finally, the third type of questions are known as contrast questions. These enable ethnographers to establish what informants mean by the terms they use in their language by getting them to contrast these with other terms. For example, a student-ethnographer may find out what connotations the term 'Southerner' holds for Americans by asking them "What is the difference between a Southerner and a Northerner?"

The technique of ethnographic interviewing would seem to be suited to the context of telecollaboration via e-mail for various reasons. Firstly, as the communication between interviewer and interviewee is asynchronous, the students who are carrying out the interviews have ample time, firstly, to reflect on what their informants tell them and then, secondly, to decide on what questions will best lead to further exploration of this input. If the project is sufficiently integrated into the learners' classes, then they can also receive support and advice from their teachers and classmates about how to go about the interview and to analyse the data. Learners who are engaged in traditional ethnographic fieldwork during their period of study abroad are unlikely to have access to such support. Furthermore, as was seen in section 2.4.2, the anonymous nature of virtual interaction often provides support for learners who are shy or not confident about interacting with speakers of the foreign language. This means that learners who would

normally be unwilling to carry out face-to-face ethnographic interviews in their local area or in the foreign culture may be happier about using this investigative technique in a virtual environment.

Müller-Hartmann warns that intercultural learning is best brought about in e-mail exchanges through an intense negotiation of meaning as opposed to simply a relationship of questions and answers:

> "Das [i.e. intercultural learning] geschieht aber nur, wenn das Projekt auf Austausch von Informationen und ein Aushandeln von Bedeutung angelegt ist und die Partner nicht zur reinen Informationsabfrage benutzt (1999a: 168)."

This point was confirmed in chapter four of this thesis when the correspondence via e-mail between Essen and Clemson often resulted in an exchange of information about both cultures but in little reflection on the home culture. It is important to make clear, however, that carrying out ethnographic interviews via e-mail and videoconferencing does not imply a mere process of questions and answers. Ethnographic interviewing does indeed involve questions and answers, but it also includes an intense negotiation of meaning between informant and ethnographer as the interviewer builds on the informant's answers and attempts to reconstruct as accurately as possible how the informant experiences his or her world.

In his discussion on e-mail exchanges, Fischer (1998) also calls for learners to be trained in the skills of ethnographic interviewing in order to find out and learn more about how their partners view their world. However, the author does not go into great detail as to how he sees the technique being implemented. He admits that the exact process of ethnographic interviewing may not be suited to the e-mail medium but he mentions the importance of "listening very carefully to the informant as well as understanding one's own cultural background which serves as the interpretive conceptual structure for our understanding on the informant (1998: 83)".

There are indeed certain practical problems which may hinder the application of ethnographic interviewing to e-mail exchanges. Firstly, it has been seen in the previous projects that e-mail exchanges involve, by nature, a balanced relationship which requires both partners to contribute more or less equal amounts of information about

themselves and their cultures. In this way, both learners stand to learn from each other. A general rule of these projects would appear to be that if students want *to receive* information from their partners about a certain topic, then they should first of all *provide* their partners with input on how they see and experience that same topic. However, ethnography, on the other hand, usually involves a less balanced turn-taking relationship. Spradley explains: "The relationship is asymmetrical: the ethnographer asks almost all the questions, the informant talks about her experience" (1979: 67). In the case of e-mail exchanges, as both parties wish to learn about the other culture, it will be necessary for learners to take turns as acting as both ethnographers and informants. This will reduce the asymmetry of the relationship but should not impede the learners from developing a more in-depth picture of the target culture as well as a more critical understanding of their own.

A second drawback in applying ethnography to telecollaboration is related mainly to asynchronous nature of the common telecollaborative tools such as e-mail and message boards. As students are not exchanging questions and answers face-to-face, the 'informants' can easily avoid or ignore any difficult or probing questions which they do not wish to answer. Furthermore, the time delay may mean that the process of receiving content from an informant and then sending back further questions which are based on that content becomes slow and tedious and students never really get a sufficiently rich insight into the world of their partners. A remedy to this problem may be the introduction of synchronous communication tools such as chats or videoconferencing. Carrying out the ethnographic interview process through a combination of asynchronous and synchronous tools may provide learners initially with rich in-depth descriptions (via e-mail or message boards) and then allow them to make follow up questions via the synchronous medium. This was my intention in this particular exchange which combined e-mail correspondence with regular videoconferencing. For this reason, the following section looks at videoconferencing technology and describes how it has been used in foreign language education until now.

6.3 Videoconferencing: Synchronous face-to-face Communication in NBLT

6.3.1 Why use Videoconferencing?

Various synchronous communication tools have already been used quite extensively in NBLT. Students have carried out task-based discussions with their classmates through chat programs and LANs (Beauvois, 1997; Pellettieri, 2000) and have taken part in intercultural tandem exchanges with partners in different countries using MOO's (Schwienhorst, 2000; von der Emde, Schneider and Kötter, 2001). These pieces of research had reported relatively positive results for aspects of language learning such as the development of autonomy and language awareness.

In the previous projects in this thesis, synchronous tools had been ignored for mainly practical reasons. In order for students to engage in chats, MOO's or videoconferencing, it is necessary for them to be on-line at the same time. Due to different timetables, this had not been possible neither with the Clemson and Michigan groups, nor with the students in Dublin. Furthermore, synchronous communication carries with it a substantial amount of risk as the teacher and students may find that the internet connection has crashed just moments after having started their session with their partner group. If groups are only scheduled to meet each other only once a week, this can be demotivating for the students and nerve-racking for the teacher. (This had been my own experience several times during a previous videoconferencing project.) However, apart from this reason, some pedagogical issues had also influenced my choice of tools for telecollaboration.

Previously, I had believed that asynchronous tools (such as e-mail and message boards) were more suited to my research's focus on intercultural aspects of foreign language learning. Firstly, the asynchronous nature of the media would allow learners to take their time and to reflect more carefully on the comments and questions of their foreign partners than if they were dealing with interaction taking place in a chat. Secondly, asynchronous tools also allow learners to print-out and share with their classmates the texts which they are sending and receiving. This supports group work and facilitates the teachers' task of integrating exchanges into their classrooms. Although this is also possible with MOO's and some chat programs, I felt there was

something more manageable and concrete about the texts which learners would receive by e-mail. Finally, I also felt that asynchronous communication was more suited to intercultural learning as my experience had been that learners produce more detailed and in-depth content in these environments hence supporting the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of their home culture.

Despite these beliefs, when the opportunity arose in this project to combine an e-mail exchange with videoconferencing sessions I eagerly accepted for various reasons. Firstly, as mentioned in the previous section, I identified synchronous communication as playing an important role in helping students to carry out ethnographic research with their partners. I also believed that face-to-face communication would add a realistic element to the process of classroom-based intercultural communication. While e-mail gives learners time to reflect carefully on what they write to their partner, normal intercultural communication does not allow for this luxury. Videoconferencing would prepare learners to employ their skills of intercultural communication *in real time*, thereby reflecting Byram's skill of discovery and interaction which involves the ability to acquire knowledge about the target culture "under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (1997a: 52).

Much of the recent CALL literature has spoken about the imminent arrival of videoconferencing technology into the language classroom and about the benefits that this will have for both teachers and learners (Moore, 2002; Fürstenberg et. al., 2001). For many, the technology has come to be seen as the next logical addition to student interaction via e-mail or chat programs and MOO's. Using this technology, students will not only be able to interact and to write to their teachers or virtual classmates, but will also be able to hear and see them as well. However, despite much talk of its potential, the literature is still lacking many examples of good practice. Wilcox suggests: "The stigma of videoconferencing is that, throughout its history, next year has always been the year it was going to 'really take off'" (2000: 17). Problems such as the high cost of hardware and software and the poor quality of sound and images have meant that few language teachers have so far experimented with videoconferencing in their classes. Nevertheless, isolated reports of videoconferencing are beginning to appear in the area. Therefore, after identifying what videoconferencing actually involves, the different approaches to implementing the technology in the foreign language classroom will be

looked at and various issues related to applying the medium in this context will be discussed.

6.3.2 What is videoconferencing?

First of all, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term videoconferencing. Videoconferencing can be defined as a point-to-point closed communications system connecting computers that are equipped with video (Roblyer, 1997: 58). In order to take part in a videoconference, users require a camera, a screen, a microphone, loudspeakers and the necessary software. Communication usually takes place via ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) lines or over the Internet, using IP (Internet Protocol) addresses. Both systems can suffer from low quality visual images and sound, however ISDN is considered more reliable due to its greater bandwidth. Although using the internet to carry out videoconferences generally involves low quality, the low cost tends to make it the more popular option with educational institutions.

In the context of foreign language education it is also important to distinguish between room-based and desktop videoconferencing. Desktop videoconferencing involves carrying out a videoconference using a camera, microphones etc. which are connected to a personal computer (see fig. 6.1 below). This is suited to one-to-one communication. Videoconferencing software applications such as NetMeeting allow users to combine the videoconference with a shared whiteboard on their screens where each participant can write, draw diagrams and make changes to what the other has written. As the bandwidth of the Internet is often too low to support good quality interaction, many users opt to freeze the picture image of their partner on the screen and simply use the audio and whiteboard functions.

Alternatively, room-based videoconferencing is generally organised on a group-to-group basis. In this case, a class sits in front of a large screen where they can view the participants at the other site as well as a smaller image of themselves (see fig. 6.2). It is common in higher education institutions to use this form of the technology for distance learning programmes. In this way, students or lecturers far away from the home campus can take part in classes. In this case, the system usually employs an ISDN connection to transmit information from one site to another. The quality of the set-up is usually quite

good, although the gap between sound and picture can be up to 1.5 seconds depending on the number of ISDN lines used in the exchange.

Fig. 6. 1. Desktop Videoconferencing via mini-camera, speakers and microphone.

Fig. 6.2 Room-based Videoconferencing.

6.3.3 Videoconferencing and Foreign Language Learning.

So far reports in the literature show that videoconferencing technology has been exploited by foreign language educators in a variety of ways. To get a clearer picture it is useful to classify these reports according to the way that the interaction was organised.

Teacher-to-Class: Some institutions have tried using videoconferencing to provide teacher-centred classes to students who were not at the same location as the teacher. The ReLaTe project (Buckett and Stringer, 1997) was carried out by the University of Exeter and University College, London and involved a small group of students at one site receiving French classes from an instructor at the other. Students made use of a whiteboard which they shared on their screens with their instructor to take a more active role in the class. The value of the live visual images in videoconferencing-based language instruction is highlighted in one of the many reports that have been published on the ReLaTe project:

> "Both tutors and students do value it [i.e. the visual element]; crucially, it
> provides a way of gauging reactions (e.g. frowning, smiling, puzzlement), of
> clarifying meaning (e.g. by mime) and as a way of learning some of the non-
> verbal gestures relevant to the language being taught." (Buckett and
> Stringer, 1997)

Goodfellow et al. (1996) report on a similar set-up, this time involving students of Professional English in Norway attending videoconference-based classes given by instructors and experts who were based in London. However, their conclusions about the value of videoconferencing for teacher-student based language instruction were quite different. They found that the technology did not facilitate natural group discussion, that it prohibited the teacher from exploiting the group dynamic and that, to a great extent, body language such as gestures and expressions were distorted.

Private language schools that offer on-line courses via the Internet have also exploited videoconferencing to connect teachers and students, both on a one-to-one basis and also with groups of students in a "virtual classroom". NetLearn Languages[15]

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[15] http://www.nll.co.uk

and LearnOnLine[16] are just two examples of the many schools using the technology in this way.

Student-to-Student: Many videoconference exchanges have left the teacher out of the equation completely and have enabled students to practise their language skills with native speakers from the target culture. Following in the style of Tandem exchanges, Butler and Fawkes (1999) relate how students of French at Monkeaton High School in England conversed every week on a one–to–one basis with students of EFL in a partner school in Lille, France. The students were given access to desktop computers with videoconference capabilities and interacted with a prearranged partner, taking turns to speak in French and English. The students were given task sheets before each session which they had to complete by asking their partners questions about their lives in the target culture. One of the advantages of this project was that students reported finding it less intimidating being corrected by their foreign peers than by their teachers. The research also showed that the majority of learners involved had improved their pronunciation, accuracy and fluency in the target language. McAndrew, Foubister and Mayes (1996) also engaged their students in one–to–one videoconferences, however this time all the participants were English students of French and the exchanges were used to allow students at distant sites to co-ordinate and prepare presentations and role-plays which they were going to have to perform together at a later date. To assess the value of videoconferencing for carrying out such collaborative tasks, control groups were set up to collaborate on a face-to-face basis. The conclusions were the following:

> "No significant difference was found between the presentation scores of pairs of students who had used Hipernet [i.e. videoconferencing] and those who had worked under the no-computer condition. This suggests that collaborative task based learning is adequately supported by videoconferencing, with the important implication that such methods may be appropriate for distance learning." (McAndrew, et al., 1996)

Finally, Zähner, Fauverge and Wong (2000) report on the Leverage Project which involved connecting teams of two learners of French and two learners of English together via videoconference. In the sessions the students had to collaborate together (using both languages) in order to prepare presentations. The authors found several drawbacks in the technology. Firstly, transmission delays interfered with the natural

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[16] http://www.learnonline.com

turn-taking process. Secondly, students found it difficult to signal when they wanted to take the floor and speak. Thirdly, despite the video channel, students reported receiving limited visual feedback from partners. Nevertheless, the students also notes that they found speaking to peers in the foreign language as being less stressful than talking to teachers. Also, tutoring and error correction were not explicit. Instead, learners corrected each other indirectly during their interaction. The authors conclude that the success of videoconferencing technology depends on three important aspects. Firstly, students should be given appropriate, engaging tasks which will give them a reason to interact together. Secondly, a writing tool (such as a shared whiteboard) should be available to support the oral interaction. Finally, tutors should be on hand in order to step in when problems emerge.

Class-to-Class: Finally institutions equipped with suitable technology have brought videoconferencing into their own classrooms where groups of students have been able to interact with and make presentations to a partner class from the target culture. The Mission – Mendocino Exchange described on the web pages of Pacific Bell (1997) shows how young children in Elementary schools in the USA and Mexico used videoconferencing to improve their presentation skills and find out about life in their partners' country. One of the teachers involved in the exchange says the following on the effects of videoconferencing on his students:

> "The kids couldn't stand still at first. Then they see themselves on camera and see the other students and begin to change their behaviour. They begin to enunciate and to express themselves in a more organised way. It has really helped them to enhance their public speaking skills using a new medium." (Pacific Bell, 1997)

In an interesting intercultural activity, Kinginger, Gourvés-Hayward and Simpson (1999) used class-to-class videoconferencing to bring together French and American language learners and allow them to compare interpretations of parallel texts, i.e. films, children's fairy tales and other texts which had been written for one of the culture's involved and then adapted for publication in the other. The authors found that the interaction with individual native speakers via videoconferencing allowed learners to check their developing theories about the target culture and also reminded them not to make overgeneralisations.

Schlikau (2000) reports on a class-to-class videoconferencing exchange between learners of German in Ohio, USA and future teachers of German as a foreign language at the University of Munich in Germany. The author highlights the many difficulties which the medium can cause for intercultural communication. Firstly, students often found it hard to see and judge the non-verbal behaviour of their distant partners. Secondly, as time was limited to a 60 minutes, it was necessary to plan the content of the session carefully and there was little room for spontaneity in the interaction. Similar to Zähner, Fauverge and Wong (2000), Schlikau suggests combining this technology with asynchronous, written communication in order to clear up any misunderstandings which arise during the videoconferences.

A final example of class-to-class videoconferencing comes from my own research which involved an exchange between EFL students at the University of León in Spain and learners of Spanish at the University of Northern Michigan in the USA. This exchange involved students comparing reactions to Spanish and American films which they had sent to each other as well as discussing the results of surveys which they had carried out in their home towns (O'Dowd, 2000). My research into this exchange revealed the value of videoconferencing for intercultural learning. Students were forced to reflect on aspects of their own culture when they were asked by their partners about their choice of films or the outcomes of their surveys. Furthermore, students also became aware of cultural differences in appropriate classroom behaviour as well as in posture and appearance.

Based on my research, I drew up a list of guidelines for good practice which can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the frequent use of visual materials such as photos and videos can reduce some of the pressure which the non-stop interaction often involves. Secondly, videoconferences are not suited for casual chatting and both groups should come to the session with an agreed agenda and timetable. Thirdly, when speaking or asking questions, students should address one member of the other group in order to make clear who should answer. Finally, students should clearly use non-verbal signals to show agreement, understanding etc. as verbal responses may interrupt speakers or lead to confusion.

6.3.4 Drawbacks of the medium for Foreign Language Education.

As these reported projects show, videoconferencing can offer great possibilities for foreign language learning and intercultural exchanges. Students have the opportunity to see and speak with native speakers and teachers who may be thousands of miles away from their classroom. However, like any medium of communication, videoconferencing has its limitations and foreign language teachers who try to integrate it into their classes in order to develop the different aspects of intercultural learning are likely to face the following problems.

Sound delay: Videoconferencing on the internet often suffers from bad quality sound and vision, depending on how busy the communication lines are and how many participants are taking part in the conference. The late arrival of sound after the image can give an effect similar to a badly dubbed film and can be very confusing for non-natives. For this reason, ISDN or MBone technology (a form of communication using the Internet which provides slightly quicker access than a traditional Internet connection) are seen as more reliable and better suited for the needs of language learners. ISDN offers what is known as a "dedicated connection" meaning that when two participants make an ISDN connection to carry out a videoconference they do not share the link with anyone else, unlike traditional internet connections whose speed depends on the number of users on-line at that time. However, as was pointed out earlier, issues of cost mean that internet-based conferencing has become the more popular option.

Differences to face-to-face communication: Although videoconferencing allows participants to see and hear each other in real time, the medium does not completely reproduce normal face-to-face interaction. In fact, many important aspects of face-to-face communication such as lip reading, eye contact and other aspects of body language are often hidden or distorted by the blurry images and the sound delay in the technology. These missing cues can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, interruptions and lack of comprehension. In contrast to McAndrew et. al., O'Malley, Bruce and Langton (1994) state that the intercommunication time delay which occurs even on high-quality videoconferencing means that collaborative tasks carried out in this medium may not be up to the standard of face-to-face interaction. Elsewhere, O'Malley,

Langton, Anderson, Doherty-Sneddon and Bruce (1996) also point out that due to the lack of fluidity in handovers, videoconference-based conversations tend to be characterised by longer lengths of turn and more formal language when compared with face-to-face interaction.

The effects of 'distance': Following on from the quality of the technology, another important issue for language educators using videoconferencing is how to deal with the effects of psychological distance on the content and style of the language used during the conferences. Although videoconferencing permits visual communication, it has already been shown that this does not mean that interaction will be the same as when participants are physically present at the same location. Rutter (1984) argues that a low number of social cues in a conversation ("cuelessness"), resulting from the lack of either physical presence or visual communication contributes to psychological distance among participants and this leads to more depersonalised content, a possible change in the outcome of the exchange and a more elevated degree of formality in interaction (see fig. 6.3):

> "At the start of the encounter, subjects make use of whatever social cues they can to form an impression of psychological proximity or distance – the feeling that the partner is 'there' or 'not there' – and it is this which determines the content of what is said, and so the style and the content of the interaction." (Rutter, 1984: 154)

In the case of videoconferencing, although the participants are visible to each other, they remain physically distant and this is therefore likely to affect the content, outcome and style of the interaction. Esch (1995) asserts that the effects of such psychological distance can be a major barrier to language learning. The consequences are particularly important when the focus is on the affective, intercultural aspects of language acquisition. The use of both a formal style and depersonalised content could lead to learners getting a negative impression of the other group, making them believe they are over-formal, cold or simply uninterested in the conversations.
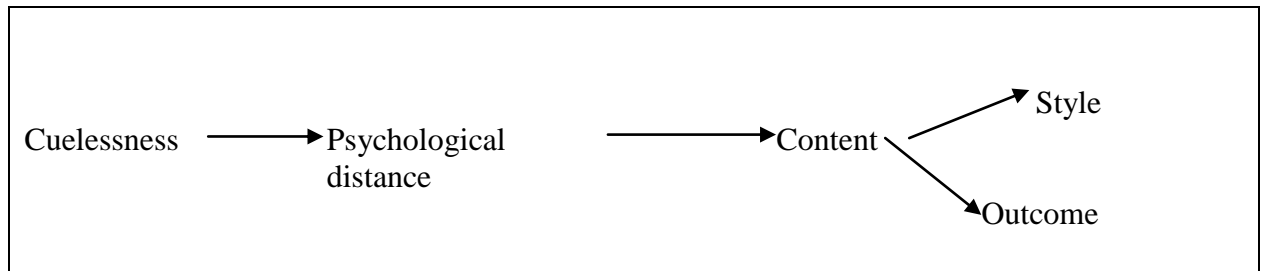
Fig.6.3 The effects of cuelessness (Rutter, 1984: 154)

Passive viewing: In group to group conferencing students may have a tendency to sit back and participate little in the exchange with the partner group. This may be due to shyness and awkwardness with the new medium, or it can be because they are simply not accustomed to interacting with a TV screen. Ostendorf (1993) warns that most students expect to be entertained by the TV and may expect the same from their colleagues on the conference screen.

Practicalities: The organising of a videoconference exchange, especially on a class to class level, holds many practical problems for any unwary school or teacher. Covering the initial costs of ISDN based hardware and software, overcoming installation and technical problems and finding a suitable partner class are the initial challenges that must be faced. Then, the teachers involved must consider how many students will be involved in the exchange, when a session can be timetabled to suit everyone involved (a major problem for trans-Atlantic exchanges!) and of course what the students are going to discuss when they finally do meet.

6.4 Project Background: Essen – Zanesville

6.4.1 Negotiating and Planning the Exchange

As in the two previous projects, I originally made contact with my partner teacher in this exchange via the IECC mailing list. Sheida was teaching a course in Communication Studies at the Zanesville campus of the University of Columbus in Ohio, USA and was interested in engaging her class in the summer semester 2003 in a project which would give learners 'hands-on' experience in intercultural communication. She explained her interest in the exchange in the following way: "It is not an easy task for me to provide experiences of exposing my students to a new culture so, when I came across this project, I thought my students would benefit from the new first-hand experience rather than reading between the lines of books an articles" (Personal correspondence: 19.06.03).

Over the five weeks which preceded our project we exchanged over twenty mails in which we told each other about aspects of our private and professional backgrounds, the social and cultural contexts in which our students were studying as well as how we envisaged carrying out the exchange. I believe that these lengthy mails to each other helped to perform two important functions. Obviously, they allowed us to plan our exchange in some detail. Furthermore, they also helped to establish a relationship of trust between us and enabled us to demonstrate our commitment to the exchange. Experience had taught me that brief messages from prospective partner-teachers promising to "set something up" inevitably reflected a lack of genuine interest in collaboration or simply a lack of time. Developing a successful e-mail exchange requires a great deal of extra work on the behalf of the teachers and those who do not have enough time to establish a working relationship with their partner-teacher in the weeks before the exchange are unlikely to be able to invest sufficient time when the exchange begins in earnest. An example of one of my initial mails to Sheida (see e-mail extract 6.1 below) reflects some of the important themes that I believe should be dealt with during the process of organising an exchange.

Dear Sheida, here are some ideas I wanted to run by you about my situation here and our exchange.

1. Background
I would suggest that exchange info on the background of our students, the universities and the towns where we work. This will give us an overview of where each group is "coming from". My class, for example, will be made up of approx 25 advanced learners of EFL. They will be in their third or fourth year of studying English and some other subject at Essen. WE will meet once a week for 90 minutes, in a classroom that has 22 on-line computers. You can see more about our department here:
 http://www.uni-essen.de/fub3/home.html

In general, the students will be good at English and interested in taking part in an e-mail exchange in order to practise their English with "real people". They will probably all have e-mail addresses already, but they will not know anything about ethnography. I will spend the first two weeks introducing them to the concept and try and get them to look at culture on a more deeper level than just facts and figures.

I can expect them to write one e-mail a week but not more. Your students should be warned that Germans don't write e-mails so often as Americans tend to do.

Essen is the 6th biggest city of Germany - 600,000 people. The university is equally big but has little of what the Americans call "spirit" or pride in the campus. People tend to come here, go to class and go home. The University website is: http://www.uni-essen.de/portale/bewerber.html

2. Tasks:

Students are matched into pairs. Each pair has to choose a concept or cultural product or practice and -through ethnographic interviewing - has to find out how this concept is 'perceived' differently in both cultures. At the end of the e-mail exchange, students will have to write an essay/report on what they have learned from the exchange and how the American and German perceptions of the concept differ. What should these concepts or cultural products and practices be? I would like to avoid 'light' topics such as hobbies or music. Instead, maybe we could look at more serious areas like "the role of religion in my society", "regional pride in my community", "attitudes to nationalism in my country", "multiculturality in my region" etc etc. These are just my first ideas, hopefully you will have more ideas too.

If we are to follow the approach to ethnographic interviews suggested by Nemetz-Robinson and by Robinson-Stuart & Nocon then the e-mail exchange would probably develop in the following way:

First e-mails: Partners write to each other, introduce themselves and their locality. (warming-up activities)

Second set of e-mails: Partners write one long mail (500 words) giving their initial overview of how their chosen topic is perceived in their culture.

Students go through the e-mails which they have received from their partners and come up with questions BASED ON THE CONTENT OF THAT MAIL.

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They can then ask these questions either in our videoconferencing
sessions or in further e-mails to each other.
In the fourth set of mails: Partners answer the questions they have
received in detail.

Essays are then written based on this exchange of emails.…
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E-mail Extract 6.1

The mail was aimed at giving my partner an insight into my teaching context and explaining how I imagined the exchange developing. Although two teachers may both have the common aim of engaging their students in intercultural contact, their reasons for doing so and their approaches to how to best achieve it may differ radically. Also, as already pointed out by Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2002), the socio-cultural context and the working conditions of teachers and students in both countries may differ radically. This does not mean that the exchanges will inevitably become unworkable because of these differences, but if the teachers are *unaware* of them they may lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdown.

In the e-mail I had also been careful to stress that my ideas about our exchange were just suggestions and I was willing to listen to alternative ideas from my partner. Sheida consequently responded with a similar mail about herself and her students and also came up with a comprehensive list of questions which the students could use as a basis for the interaction with their partners. Over a period of a week this list was edited by both of us until it contained a list of themes and questions which were relevant and comprehensible to both our classes. Similar to the process which we expected our students to engage in, Sheida and I had to engage in virtual intercultural negotiation until we arrived at a compromise which we both found acceptable to our needs. I would argue that it has not been sufficiently highlighted in the literature that, like students, teachers need to work on their skills of intercultural communication when they plan and organise an intercultural exchange for their partners. (Although there have been exceptions, see, for example, Müller-Hartmann, 2000b.)

6.4.2 Students' Backgrounds and Expectations

During the first days of their classes, both groups of students filled out a short questionnaire in order to establish their attitudes to the idea of the exchange and working with network-based technologies (see table 6.1 below). In general, it revealed two groups of learners who were very much at home working and communicating on-

line. A large majority of their friends and family were reported to be on-line and practically all students in both classes had access to the internet in their homes. However, the American group appeared to spend more time each day on-line. Furthermore, only half of the German group reported having used technology in their classes until now. It is clear from the results that the American students were more familiar with aspects of network-based learning (see table 6.1, question 8).

Curious differences emerged when the learners were asked to explain what they hoped to gain from the exchange. The Germans generally reported a desire to find out more about the American way of life and culture and to improve their English writing skills. The American group also mentioned an interest in finding out about the target culture but many of them also suggested that they were hoping to 'gain a friend' from the project. Interestingly, this possibility was not mentioned at all by the German group. This point perhaps echoes Kramsch and Thorne's (2002) suggestion that internet communication in the USA is considered to be a very human activity which involves establishing close personal relationships and taking a personal interest in the solution of problems which arise (see section 2.4.6). This appeared to be confirmed in some of the American students' final feedbacks. One American student commented that "after a few emails she didn't seem like a foreign student but more like a friend" while another complained that her partner "seemed to take things so personally…even when I tried to joke with him he would respond seriously".

When the students were asked what cultural differences they expected to encounter during the exchange, the different images which both sets of students had of the two cultures began to emerge quite clearly. The American responses appeared to show that they had an image of Germany being a rural, family-oriented and 'low-context' society. America, in contrast, was considered more fast-paced and was more advanced technologically. This was quite curious and seemed to demonstrate the influence of stereotypes as many of the Americans themselves appeared to be living and studying in quite a poor, rural environment. One student explained to her partner at the beginning of the exchange:

> There are many families here struggling to make ends meet – put food on the table and educate their children all without the benefit of full-time employment. At the technical college where I teach, we hold clothing collections so that our students can have the appropriate business clothing to pursue a career. We clean the clothing and distribute it among the poorest students…

E-mail Extract 6.2

The Germans seemed also to have been influenced by stereotypical national portraits of the USA. Their comments often reflected the common portrayal of America in the European media when they suggested that they expected to find differences in issues such as patriotism, national pride as well as religion (see table 6.1, question 9). The exchange took place just weeks after America and Britain had invaded Iraq for the second time and the question of whether the war had been justified or not was to be constantly present in our project. Whereas the vast majority of Essen students reflected the common feeling among young people in Western Europe and were against the recent Allied invasion, many of the American students clearly supported their government's actions. A military base was located near the town of Zanesville and some students had family in the armed forces. It emerged during the exchange that three of the American group themselves had actually been members of the armed forces before taking up their studies. One example of how the issue of the war was present in the exchange was the icon below which one of the American group attached to the bottom of each of her e-mails to her partner:

SUPPORT MILITARY MEN & WOMEN! **RED, WHITE & BLUE** *- These Colors Don't Run!*

E-mail Extract 6.3

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Pre-Course Questionnaire:
German T=14
American T=21

1. Have you ever used the Internet / e-mail before?
German Responses: Yes (14); No (0).
American Responses: Yes (20); No (1).

2. If yes, what do you use it for? (More than one theme was sometimes mentioned)
German Responses: Keeping in touch with family and friends via e-mail (13); Entertainment (2); Study and Research (11); Reading newspapers (1).
American Responses: E-mail (21); Research (17); Games (3); Business (3); Shopping (3).

3. Approximately what percentage of your friends are on-line?
German Responses: 90-100% (12); 50-70% (2).
American Responses: 90-100% (9); 70-90% (4); 50-70% (4); 30-50% (2); 10-30% (2).

4. Do you have a computer with Internet connection at home?
German Responses: Yes (11); No (3) (All 3 are Erasmus students).
American Responses: Yes (18); No (3).

5. If not, where do you go to access e-mail etc?
German Responses: University (3).
American Responses: City Library (1) and at University (3).

6. Do you already have an e-mail account?
German Responses: Yes (12); More than one (3).
American Responses: Yes (19); No (2).

7. On average how much time a day do you spend 'on-line'?
German Responses: 15-30 minutes (6); 60-90 minutes (4); 2 hours (4).
American Responses: 15-30 minutes (4); 30-60 (5); 60-90 (1); 90-120 (6); 2-3 hours (3); 8-10 hours (2)

8. Have you ever used new technologies in your classes before? Give details.
German Responses: No (7) / Linguistics Online course (5) E-mail exchanges (2)
American Responses: On-line courses (3) / Powerpoint presentations (1), blackboard (9), e-mail essays to teachers (1) videoconferencing based course (1) on-line Project work (3)

9. What cultural differences would you expect to find between yourself and your partner? (More than one theme was sometimes mentioned.)
Most Common German Responses: Patriotism / National Pride (5); Religion (5); Attitudes to war (3); No significant differences (3); Education: (2)
Most Common American Responses (More than one theme was sometimes mentioned): General differences in cultural values (5); Attitudes to the family (5); Religion (4); No substantial differences (3); USA is more fast-paced and technology-oriented (2).

10. What do you hope to gain from this on-line exchange with foreign partners? (More than one theme was sometimes mentioned.)
Most Common German Responses: Better insight into American culture/ American way of life (9); Improving writing skills (8).
Most Common American Responses: A better understanding of German culture (9); Gaining a friend (6); Getting comfortable with on-line learning (3).

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Table 6.1 Pre-Course Questionnaire for German and American Group

6.4.3 Development of the Exchange

Sheida's class in Communication Studies was made up of 21 American students and was due to run from 31 March until 7 June 2003. The class was to meet twice a week. My class of advanced EFL learners (Integrated Language Course 3) had 25 learners and our term was to last from 14 April until 29 July 2003. As the American group were not studying German, the exchange was to take place completely in English. Due to the short period of time during which our classes would overlap (6 weeks), we agreed that the exchange during this period should be as intensive as possible. Students were required to write a minimum of one e-mail per week during this period and three videoconferencing sessions were scheduled to take place at two-week intervals. The American students were to begin their classes before the German class, so it was agreed that each American student would send me an e-mail introducing themselves. I would then print these out and distribute them to my students on the first week of class. In this way our short time together could be exploited to the maximum.

The students were given a list of topics upon which they could base their exchange and final essay. These topics encouraged learners to explore the contrasting perspectives on issues such as multiculturalism, patriotism, religion or education in both cultures. As I had mentioned in my e-mail to Sheida, I hoped that establishing such topics would mean students would not invest too much time in discussing the more superficial areas of hobbies, food and taste in music. While these may be good topics in the warming-up stage of an exchange, neither of us considered them suited for serious cultural investigations.

The exchange was essentially divided into four key stages. In stage one, during the first two weeks of the course in Zanesville (in the weeks before the German semester began), the American students explored some background information on Essen and Germany, decided on topics from our list which they would be interested in researching and then sent an introductory e-mail to me in Essen. When our class began (stage two), I distributed these mails to my students and they choose partners according to the topics which the Americans had suggested. During the initial weeks in the Essen class, students were introduced to text extracts and videos on the topic of ethnographic interviewing (Agar, 1980; National Language Resource Centre, 1997; Nemetz Robinson, 1985; Spradley, 1979) in order to prepare them for using these techniques in

their videoconferences and e-mails. As I had found out in the previous projects (i.e. chapters four and five of this thesis) that students often had limited, fact-based understandings of what culture learning meant, we also read extracts from Byram and Esarte-Sarries (1991) and Spradley (1979) which clearly illustrated the anthropological definition of culture.

In this second stage, students from both classes also engaged in an intensive exchange of mails with their partners over a six week period. They collected these mails and the German students also agreed to send me a copy of all mails which they sent and received. During this period the students also took part in three videoconference sessions. These conferences were based on the class-to-class format but used an internet connection to connect the two groups together, as this was considered an easier and more economical option. The sessions lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each time. Due to timetable problems, these had to be scheduled outside of class time and not all students could attend the three sessions. Nevertheless, the majority of students attended at least two of the three sessions.

At the end of this six week period (stage three), students from both groups wrote essays reflecting on their exchange. As each pair of students had exchanged information about a wide variety of topics, they were given a certain degree of choice in the title of their essays. Some of the German students wrote comparative essays on the topics which they had explored with their partner and submitted work with titles such as "Discrimination against minorities in Germany and the USA" or "Religion in the USA and Germany". However, others chose to reflect on what they had learned from the intercultural experience in itself and produced work on "The Challenge of Interaction between Cultures" and "E-mails: A good technique to do intercultural research?". At this point the American course came to an end and for the remaining five weeks (stage four), the German class read further texts of intercultural communication (for example, House, 2000) and discussed their own experiences in the light of these texts.

	German Class	*American Class*
Stage One	----	Introductory mails sent to Essen
Stage Two	E-mails exchanged between partners. Three videoconferences between the two classes take place.	E-mails exchanged between partners. Three videoconferences between the two classes take place.
Stage Three	Essays written based on exchange.	Essays written based on exchange.
Stage Four	Outcomes of exchange explored in class	----

Table 6.2 Development of the Exchange in both classes

6.4.4 Learning from Previous Experiences

Thanks to the work of authors such as Belz (2001, 2002, 2003), Donath and Volkmer (1997), Fischer, 1998, Müller-Hartmann (1999a, 1999b, 2000a and 2000b) and Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2002, 2003), an impressive corpus of research is emerging on the factors which can influence the outcomes of German-American telecollaboration. In particular, issues such as different academic calendars, culture-specific types of evaluation, differing levels of access to computers and different language levels have all been seen to influence the outcomes of exchanges. While they recognise that many institutional limitations (such as the different academic calendar) cannot be altered for an exchange, Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2002) suggest there are certain steps which can be taken to facilitate the development of an exchange between German and American third-level learners. I will now outline these steps and suggest how we tried to take them into account in our exchange between Essen and Zanesville. By explicitly taking these suggestions into account I hoped that my work and research would benefit not only from the outcomes of my own action research, but also from that of other researchers.

1. *Make students aware of the institutional demands under which their partners are working.* At the beginning of our exchange myself and Sheida exchanged a good deal of information about our universities, the forms of assessment of our classes as well as our students' levels of access to technology. From this information we received from each other, we created handouts to give to our students. Students were also provided with weblinks about the two universities.

2. *Have an extended 'warm-up' phase at the beginning of the exchange during which students can find out more about their partner and their institutional context.* Due to the short length of the project, an extended warm-up phase was not possible. However, we did require the American students to send lengthy introductory mails and we encouraged students to write at least twice a week during the first two weeks of the exchange.

3. *Teachers should plan their courses so they could overlap at least once a week. This will allow for periods of synchronous communication together.* Unfortunately, our classes did not overlap as our timetables had already been planned months before we came into contact. Nevertheless, after some negotiation we were able to find times outside of class when members of both groups could come together for the videoconference sessions. If students and teachers are sufficiently motivated then it may not be necessary for contact to take place during class time.

4. *Try to organise the German course as a Hauptseminar so that both groups have to present work for their course instead of simply attending.* Although my course was not a Hauptseminar, I made it clear to my students at the beginning of the course that they would only receive their *Teilnahmeschein* if they participated fully in the exchange. Myself and Sheida both agreed that the course requirements would involve the submission of an essay.

5. *Allow for different forms of interaction (i.e. working alone, pair work, group work) so that learners are exposed to different forms of discourse and so learners are not overly reliant on one particular partner.* During the exchange students had the opportunity to interact with their partner in one-to-one interaction via e-mail and they also interacted to the complete foreign group in the videoconferences. Regularly during their classes, students were encouraged to share their e-mail interaction with classmates so that they could compare experiences and benefit from each other's 'material'. Students were also encouraged to use the data from one another's exchanges in their final essays.

6. *Stress to learners that due to different language levels they and their partners may have different contributions to make to each others' learning.* As this exchange only took place in English, it was clear that the American group would be primarily focussed on the cultural content of the mails, while the German group would receive cultural content and also benefit linguistically from interacting with a native speaker. Advocates of tandem learning highlight the value of using the students' L1 and L2 but the reality is that it is often difficult for two classes who are studying each others' mother tongue to come into contact together. I would suggest that, if both groups believe they are going to benefit in some way from the exchange (as was the case here), the tandem language principle may not be necessary.

7. *Each group should be made aware that one group may have more difficulty in accessing on-line technology than the other.* In a previous e-mail exchange which I between German and American students which I researched (see chapter four) this had been an important issue and the American group had registered their surprise in not receiving mails from their partners more often. However, in the two years which had passed since that exchange German students here in Essen appeared to have increased their levels of access to on-line technology. For this reason, this was not considered an important issue. However, American students did praise their German partners for using a writing style in their e-mails which was more formal and structured than what they were used to, whereas the Germans were often surprised by the short, conversational style of their American correspondents. In future exchanges it may be advisable to make non-American students aware of the informal style which is common in American students' e-mail correspondence.

8. *Finally, teachers need to play an active role in guiding learners through their intercultural encounters.* In order to help the students take part in their intercultural interaction, both Sheida and I regularly discussed the problems and doubts which our students were having with their partners. I often made up worksheets based on their e-mails and would dedicate time in class to discussions on how American e-mails could be interpreted or how German e-mails could be more written more effectively. I also showed recorded extracts

from our videoconferences afterwards and discussed with learners the cultural 'rich points' which were emerging in these sessions. Our e-mails to each other immediately after each videoconferencing session often enabled us to 'defuse' misunderstandings and also helped to put each groups' comments and behaviour during the conferences into context. We would then pass on this information to our classes.

6.5 Research Findings

This section looks at the outcomes of our project and attempts to establish how videoconferencing and e-mail can best be combined in order to contribute to the development of ICC. As this is the only project which has involved synchronous technology, the particular contribution of videoconferencing will also be explored in detail. The success of training learners to carry out virtual ethnographic interviews with their partners will also be evaluated.

In comparison to the two previous chapters, the research findings reported here focus exclusively on qualitative data such as interviews carried out with the students by e-mail, qualitative questionnaires, class transcripts, exchange transcripts and students' essays. This is because I felt that the salient points which I saw emerging in this project could be best illustrated through detailed explanations and commentaries by the learners, as opposed to quantitative survey results and quantitative analysis of their correspondence. Due to restrictions in the students' time, interviews were generally carried out by e-mail and not face-to-face.

6.5.1 The Contribution of Videoconferencing to the Intercultural Exchange

Before the videoconferences, it was explained to students that the sessions were aimed at helping them find out more information about the topics which they had been discussing in their e-mail exchange. The novelty value of being able to see and hear their partners who were thousands of miles away and the shock that during each one of the sessions some kind of explicit culturally-based disagreement or communication breakdown occurred, meant that this dimension of the exchange made a big impression on both sets of learners.

At this stage it is perhaps useful to provide brief accounts of the three instances of 'culture clash' as they significantly influenced the outcomes of this exchange and the students' attitudes to the medium of videoconferencing. The first instance occurred when one of the German students attempted to explain to the American group the problematic aspects of multiculturalism in Germany. When the student tried to describe why Germans often had a negative attitude towards the role of women in the Turkish immigrant community, Sheida, the teacher in the American group interjected and spoke

for a considerable length of time on how western societies often misinterpreted the Muslim religion and its treatment of women. (It is important to point out at this stage that Sheida herself is a Muslim, originally from Iran.) Although Sheida later assured me that she had not intended her comments to be seen as a 'lecture' to the German student, I found out in the following class that the general consensus among the German students was that they had been reprimanded for their intolerant attitude. Sylvia, the student who had originally made the comments, insisted that she had not speaking about her own opinions, but she had rather been attempting to describe a common perception in her country.

The second instance of culture clash occurred in the following videoconference two weeks later when the topic of gun control in the United States arose. When the Germans asked their American counterparts what was their opinion about the right to bear arms, the majority of the Americans expressed their belief that this right was an intrinsic part of the American constitution and that it was "people, not guns who kill people". The American group also spoke of the use of guns for hunting and sports and one of the students explained how the act of going shooting was an important part of the bonding process with her father. The German group initially began by asking for more detailed questions on these points, but their questions quickly turned into counter-arguments, thereby demonstrating their disagreement with the Americans' perspective. Gregor, for example, asked the following: "I would like to know how can you determine who has the right to have a gun and who is able to bear a gun. I don't know how you determine this right. How do you know if in his mental state a person can show responsibility?" Although the exchange never turned into a heated argument, the difference of opinion was very clear between the two groups and the Germans reported being shocked at the opinions which they encountered.

The final example of culture clash was based, inevitably perhaps, on the invasion of Iraq. At the beginning of our third session, the German group were asked by an American to describe the anti-war movement in Europe. The German group initially spoke about factual events such as demonstrations which had taken place in various cities. However, Ana, an exchange student from Poland, went on to speak of her own personal convictions and used the example of the destruction of Poland in World War II to support her anti-war stance. At this point a mature student in the American group

began to speak of how she felt that, while war was a bad thing, it had also been necessary at certain times in order to free the slaves in the United States and to stop Hitler in Europe. She then became quite emotional and began to cry as she spoke of the sacrifice many American soldiers had made in different parts of the world. At this stage, to the relief of the German group who appeared not to know how to deal with her reaction, the internet connection between the two groups broke down. When the connection was re-established, both groups jokingly agreed to change the subject of discussion. Nevertheless, the event definitely marked the German group and it was referred to repeatedly in their classes, their e-mails and their final essays.

Despite these events, the students from both classes responded very positively to the experience of being able to meet and interact together in the three videoconference sessions and the video recordings of the interaction provided a great deal of rich learning material which was later integrated into our classes. However, it also became clear from an analysis of the research data (in particular the questionnaires and the class and videoconference transcripts), that the medium can be most effectively employed for intercultural learning when it is combined with non-synchronous communication, such as e-mail. Therefore, in the remainder of this section, I will firstly examine the benefits which students and teachers found in using the medium. Following that, I will attempt to argue why it is necessary to combine the medium with non-synchronous, written communication in order to maximise its potential for intercultural learning.

The feedback from the German students which I collected after the first videoconference and at the end of the exchange revealed a wide variety of reasons why they had found these sessions to be a positive experience. A summary of what the students considered to be the main contributions of the medium can be seen here:

Nicole	As I mentioned earlier, discussing via videoconference is absolutely different from e-mailing. First of all the turn taking goes much faster and therefore we could gain more information in less time. Videoconferencing enables a discussion closer to reality. Since we can make "face-to-face conversation", we have several communication channels (visual as well as auditory) we can use (although I have to mention that the picture on the screen was not very good and face expressions could not be recognized). It was easier to go into details, because we had the opportunity to react quickly so that they had no chance but answering.
Andi	I really enjoyed it. First it felt kind of strange, but I think we all got used to it very quickly. In a face-to-face discussion people are more honest I feel, since they don't have much time to think about their answers - plus you can see their faces while they give their arguments which I think is a very important aspects in a discussion.
Monica	Yes, again. I really enjoyed it. It was a bit awkward to ask questions to people you don't know at the very beginning, because you never know what reaction you may expect….
Günther	The advantages were that we also spoke and heard English, not only wrote and read it, and that one could also gain input and inspiration from other persons.
Nina	Yes, I think that we achieved a lot by talking to each other during the videoconference
Nadine	… it was great to see our partners and so to get a better view on the people we are writing at. Furthermore, it gave the chance to get more spontaneous reactions than one can get in emails.
Jessica	Yes, because they had to answer intuitively and you were able to see on their faces what they were really thinking.
Milenna	Well, about my opinion on the use of the internet in learning a language, I find it brilliant, and not just because it gives us the opportunity to get in contact with different cultures, but also because during the videoconferences we can also see our 'interviewees' faces, answering to our questions!
Ana	It was a new experience to me and I am happy I could have it. It was good to be able to see the others, especially my partner. I had not asked her before how old she was, and from her first mail I even thought she was a man!!! Then I realised my mistake, but still didn't know her age and was a bit afraid to ask about it. The conference helped me realised whom I write to. Our contact got more personal after that and I think we can understand each other better. What's more, the conference was much more interesting and fun to do. We could see people's faces, their reactions to our questions, their emotions. I found it much more personal and better than just reading and writing emails.
Iolanda	Yesterday's videoconference was very useful for me because I could learn more about how Americans view multiculturalism and how they feel to live in

	a country as multicultural as the USA. I was confronted with new terms that they use like: salad bowl or co-cultures. Other topics I was interested in were also discussed and I could have distinct opinions on the same matter. I think our videoconference turned out really good. Everybody got the chance to ask or answer some question. The majority of the topics that we discussed were of everybody's interest and I think some of our doubts were removed. Some aspects of the American culture are now perfectly clear to us and we will feel much more comfortable when we have to write our essays. When we write our e-mails, like I said before, we only have one point of view and through the videoconference we got to know various opinions and also discuss them, something we can't do via e-mail.
Corinne	I found the videoconference very interesting. It was the first time that I assisted to this kind of communication and I really appreciate it. I think that the spontaneity which is linked to an oral discussion could show aspects which could be hidden in a writing discussion (because you are more diplomatic when you are writing and you have more time to think about the appropriate way to explain your ideas).
Sylvia	It was nice to see their faces and style. It was a great experience just to see how this technology works and a funny feeling that we could see each other although we were separated by so many miles.

Table 6.3 The advantages of videoconferencing

These comments reveal an interesting variety of advantages. First of all, many students appreciated the opportunity to engage in 'normal' face-to-face communication with their American partners. They found that turn-taking in this form of communication was more efficient than through e-mailing and consequently they were able to collect more information about their partners and their culture than they were in their e-mail correspondence. Secondly, as this responses to their questions had to come 'on the spot', some students (see the comments of Nicole, Nadine, Jessica and Corinne above) also believed that the answers they received were more honest and more insightful than the diplomatic and well-thought out responses they received in their e-mails. In the words of Jessica, "you were able to see on their faces what they were really thinking". A further advantage was that the videoconferencing enabled students to get to know their partners better and, as a result, made them more relaxed in their relationships via e-mail. Ana's comments are particularly representative of this point of view: "The conference helped me realised whom I write to. Our contact got more personal after that and I think we can understand each other better."

The feedback also reveals that the students often appreciated the opportunity to find out the points of view of other Americans besides that of their e-mail partners. This was mentioned in the feedback above by Günther and Iolanda, but Gregor also explained this to me in the following way in an e-mail interview:

> It was fascinating to see their reaction to certain topics face to face and to discuss the themes you have already talked about with a single person with other people whose attitudes are different to the attitudes of the special e-mail partner. The most important thing was to hear and see them talk and speak freely about their culture and their way of life.

E-mail Extract 6.4

This contribution is quite significant to the intercultural learning process. By being exposed to the different personal experiences and points of view of the American group in the videoconference, the German group were able to put the information they were receiving from their e-mail partner into a wider context and decide to what extent they could generalise from their partners' input. Of course, as was stressed in the previous studies (see, in particular, section 4.4.2), the teacher needs to provide learners with other materials and content about the target culture which, in turn, will help learners to put this input from the whole class into a more representative context. Learners need to be aware to what extent they can generalise about the target culture based on the input of one informant, or, in the case of videoconferencing, one class. However, these limitations should not take away from the value of the input which they receive from their partners. The individual stories and opinions of the exchange partners help students put the 'factual' and statistical data from their textbooks into perspective and reminds them of the dangers of over-generalising about the target culture. Kern explains this is the following way:

> "By comparing what they learn through their e-mail exchanges with what they learn through teachers, textbooks, and other media, learners can evaluate information in a framework of multiple perspectives. For example, when American learners receive detailed personal accounts of life in twenty different French families, they can suddenly see the limitations of global generalizations in textbook portrayals of 'the French family'." (2000: 258)

A further contribution of videoconferencing to intercultural learning which is perhaps not clear from the comments above is that students used the opportunity of face-to-face contact to clarify doubts and explore theories about the target culture which

had emerged in their e-mail correspondence. A short extract from the class which took place in Essen just before the second videoconferencing session illustrates this quite clearly:

Robert: Have you all thought about what you would like to find out during the conference?

Lucie: Mine wrote that she knows her boyfriend for almost three years and then want to get married at the end of this year. I wrote to her about it and said that we wouldn't do that here. I mean, I know my boyfriend for six years and I don't want to marry him

Others: [laughter]

Lucie: And she told me they have these very old buildings and they are only from the 19th century and I want to know if they have any idea about how old things are here..

Robert: I know it's something we often laugh about. We have a tendency to be condescending about it and say that the Americans have 'no culture'. We have to be careful about that.

Lucie: Yeah, but it was like she didn't know that we had older buildings.

Robert: Ok, but try and phrase these questions that doesn't come across, you know, condescending.

Nicole: I would like to know whether they think there is racism in Germany. Because I got a question from my partner last week, she wanted to know how black people are treated here and if it is ok with me because she would understand if I don't want to talk about that. So I get the impression that maybe they think that all of the German people are racist.

Robert: But how do you ask that question in a way which doesn't come across as 'Do you think we are all Nazis?`

Others: [laughter]

Robert: That's the problem, because if you ask direct questions like that you will get the answer 'of course not', so how do you find out how they really believe?

Nicole: I would ask them about general opinions about Germans I suppose.

Robert: Remember, when you ask a question you have to hold a microphone. So when you ask a question and they answer, don't just say 'thank you' and pass on the microphone. Quiz them about their response. Remember ethnographic interviewing? From their answer, you try to develop it more.

Class Extract 6.1

In this extract two students mention how they wanted to explore in greater detail impressions which they felt their American partners have of Germany. Obviously, they felt they had identified certain stereotypes about Germany written 'between the lines' in their partners' mails and they saw the videoconferencing session as an opportunity to find out if these stereotypical images really existed or not. The videoconferencing medium was obviously considered a quicker, more direct way than e-mail to clear up their doubts and to clearly establish the foreign perspective. In his own research, Müller-Hartmann similarly found that synchronous communication tools (in his case,

text-based chat programs) served this purpose of clarifying aspects of intercultural dialogue which were proving difficult to deal with in asynchronous mode:

> "Die synchrone Kommunikation erlaubt es, direkt Fragen auszuhandeln bzw. nachzufragen, und unterbindet das bewusste oder unbewusste Vergessen von gestellten Fragen in E-mail-Briefen, deren Eintreffen vielleicht schon einige Tage zurückliegt. Es ermöglicht das Nachfragen bei eventuel unbequemen Sachverhalten, die in der asychronen Kommunikation oft unterschlagen , missachtet oder vergessen werden können." (2000b: 298)

A final, but very important contribution to the development of the learners' ICC was that it gave them authentic practice in developing the skills of discovery and interaction *in real time* as well as critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997a: 52-53). Whereas, in asynchronous interaction, students have ample time to reflect on how to interact appropriately with their partners, the videoconferences required students to elicit knowledge about the American culture and to negotiate meaning between the two groups there and then. This obviously made the task of intercultural communication much more challenging for the students but the feedback would suggest that the occasions when there were misunderstandings or disagreement in the videoconferences proved to be the most insightful and rich in culture learning for the German group. Apparently, the breakdown in communication clearly illustrated to the students how cultural beliefs and values can differ greatly between two supposedly 'similar' western societies. Some extracts from the students' final essays can demonstrate this point:

Nina	[After discussing the American students' arguments in the videoconference as regards their constitutional right to bear arms:] To the Germans, the arguments given by the American students sounded so strange and were not easy to follow. To the Americans on the other hand, the things we said were probably hard to understand, too. I felt that this topic proved best how different laws can lead to completely different attitudes. Maybe if we had grown up with such a constitution, we would support it the same way they do.
Ana	Another difficulty of the international communication results from differences in history of the two countries. This was highly visible in the discussion during a videoconference about the right to carry arms, which was given to Americans in the second amendment to their constitution. In spite of all the shootings and accidents indirectly caused by this law the Americans are very reluctant to abandon it, probably because it has been there for so long, which can be further related to their history, especially to the Wild West, the frontier and dangers connected with them, which required from the people taking some self-defence measures.
Sylvia	We were discussing the European attitude towards the war in Iraq when suddenly Bobby, one of the American students, started crying and began to defend the American point of view very strongly and emotionally. The reason for her strong reaction can be found in her personal background. She comes from a military family which was deeply involved in the war business. She even might have lost some loved ones. Her personal experience didn't allow her to discuss the topic objectively. In my eyes it is almost impossible to exclude a person's individual background from cultural exchange. It is a real challenge to cope with situations like this were a lot of intuition and sensitivity is needed. We felt overwhelmed by Bobby's reaction and it would have been easier if we had been prepared for a situation like this. So how can we prevent misunderstanding each other and overcome the fact that we have been trained our whole lives to react to things in a certain way? What are the skills that we need to communicate more effectively?

Essay Extracts 6.1

In these extracts students reveal how they have become more aware during the videoconferences of how social, historical and personal issues can influence one's cultural perspective and are therefore beginning to relativise their own values by coming into contact with those of others. Differences in attitude between the two groups on the subject of gun control led Ana and Nina to look at the historical and political contexts in which the American pro-gun arguments needed to be seen. Even though she did not agree with the American student's point of view, Nina was able to surmise that: "Maybe

if we had grown up with such a constitution, we would support it the same way they do." Similarly, Sylvia's reflections on an American student's emotional reaction to the question of the Iraq war brought her to take into account how the social and political contexts within which a person is living can influence their political views. It appears that the 'first-hand' experience of breakdown in intercultural communication and the intense, personal nature of the videoconference interaction meant that the German students were not able to ignore the American perspective, but instead they had to look for the cultural principles and values which had made their American partners develop these perspectives. Being able to identify the values which underlie the behaviour of members of the foreign culture is a vital part of Byram's critical cultural awareness. In this component of ICC, he refers to the ability to "identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one's own and other cultures" (1997a: 53), which is what appears to be occurring in these cases. (However, as will be seen in the following section, even though students were able to identify the values which were inherent in the American's beliefs, many of them would inevitably reject these and would show little evidence of learning that perspectives other than their own were equally valid.)

I would argue that an intercultural exchange solely by e-mail might have reduced the possibility of these students looking for the historical and social reasons behind the American perspective. With one or two exceptions, the e-mail exchanges between the two classes did not involve any misunderstandings or arguments about cultural issues. Students tended to present their perspective on the issues at hand and then wait to receive their partners' point of view. If these opinions differed in any way, this was simply accepted as a difference in opinion but it rarely led to any intense discussion or dialogue. The 'face-to-face' nature of videoconferencing, on the other hand, meant that learners could not simply present opposing perspectives on issues and move on. They were, in a way, obliged by the nature of the medium to delve further into the topics in hand in order to find out why the other group felt the way they did. It was when they did this that the link between their partners' behaviour and beliefs and the personal, social and historical factors began to emerge.

6.5.2 Combining Videoconferencing and E-mail

Despite these beneficial outcomes of the videoconference exchanges, our experience showed that it is still important to combine this medium with a synchronous communication tool. This may be e-mail or a message board, however the group-to-group nature of videoconferencing means that it is best integrated with the more personal student-to-student format of e-mail communication. This becomes evident upon examining the transcripts of the videoconferences with the content of the students' e-mails and then triangulating this with data from the student feedbacks collected throughout the project.

Comparing the two types of interaction, it is clear that, while videoconferencing may allow for a quicker rate of turn-taking and may facilitate short discussions on students' doubts and theories about each others' cultures, the e-mail exchange permitted students on both sides to write in great detail about their home culture and to develop their ideas and arguments in a much more fluent and insightful manner. The following extracts taken from the first videoconferencing session and one of the students' e-mails are based on the same subject, multiculturalism in Germany, and are quite representative of the two types of communication in this exchange. The first extract is taken from the videoconferencing discussion:

Gregor (Germany): We had this thing coming up in our discussion – multiculturalism. How do you feel about multiculturalism in the States?
Randi (USA): This is Randi. And we have many many co-cultures in the United States. How I feel about it personally is that I think it's a plus that we have as many co-cultures as we do. I think it's a good learning experience to experience someone else's culture and try to understand how someone else lives their life and to communicate better with them and I think we would get awfully bored if we were the same.
Gregor (Germany): You spoke about co-cultures. Are they integrated in your society or are they just this co-cultures living side by side?
Randi (USA): We have a kind of salad bar arrangement. We have many cultures that live side by side and are mixed together in every day settings
Gregor (Germany): I think that's the same in Germany. Living side by side but I have no example for this.
Corrine (Germany): As a French, I have the feeling that it is not the same as in Germany. Here there is a big Turkish community but I never saw a German student speaking to a Turkish student. It is very rare and I am just wondering why there are such differences between the two communities.
Robert (Teacher, Germany): Is it different in France that in Germany?

> **Corrine (Germany):** I think we have a big Arabic community and they are much more integrated, much more adapted than Turkish community here. I was wondering maybe it is because the African community already speak French.

Videoconferencing Extract 6.1

Although the conversation is quite animated, it is clear that the cultural content is, at times, quite superficial. The American student recognises the value of living in a multicultural society and describes multiculturalism in the USA as being "a kind of salad bar arrangement" but the German group never gets to hear in detail what this actually implies. There is no attempt on the behalf of the American group to offer practical examples of what this metaphor means to them nor do they progress to a further level of analysis and compare the term "salad bar" with the contrasting notion of "melting pot" which had been so common in the discourse of American society in the past. The German response is equally vague. Things are "the same in Germany" but on the spur of the moment the student cannot offer any practical example of how this works in reality. The problem would appear to be that while videoconferencing may be suited to interaction based on students' own experiences or their personal opinions on specific topics (as was the case in the discussions on the Iraq war and gun control), it may not be suitable when they are 'put on the spot' and are asked to report factual information about general issues in their society which they may be unfamiliar with or have not thought about to any great extent.

However, giving students the opportunity to reflect on this topics and perhaps to do some research on them before asking them to write about them in e-mails may produce rather different results as the following extract from a German student's e-mail on the same subject illustrates:

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"As a future teacher I know that it's a fact that Turkish children have language problems and that they are mainly caused by cultural differences. There are prejudices on both sides and it's extremely hard to overcome the problems as long as nobody tries to make a step in the other one's direction. Some German parents don't send their children into schools with a high percentage of Turkish children because they fear that their lack of language knowledge could affect their own children's language acquisition process. That sounds hard but it's a reality in our schools. But on the other hand there are schools which especially train and try to integrate foreign pupils. Teachers are specially qualified and try to fill the language gap. In most secondary schools Muslim children have their own lessons in Islam. They don't have to attend classes where the Protestant or Catholic religions are taught. I went to a Catholic school for girls. Even there Muslim girls had their own lessons. You see the situation is not hopeless but it could be better. And of course September 11th didn't help to understand Muslims better…"

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E-mail Extract 6.5

In this extract the student provides her partner with detailed examples from her own experiences as well as factual information about an aspect of multiculturalism in Germans society in general. Expecting students to supply such detailed information in a videoconference (especially when operating in a foreign language) is probably quite unrealistic. Furthermore, if students were to speak in such detail in the videoconferencing sessions, they would quickly take on a 'lecture' format and few students would have the opportunity to speak or ask questions. Writing by e-mail gives students the opportunity to reflect carefully on what they want to explain, to search for factual and statistical information to support their ideas and to phrase what they mean more carefully. Rich descriptions of the home culture such as this are therefore best suited to the asynchronous written mode, while discussion and clarification of meaning based on this content can later be handled via videoconference.

The theory that the two media were best suited to carrying out distinct functions in the exchange was confirmed when I checked with the feedbacks from both the German and American students. In reference to the videoconferences, students had obviously recognised the intense nature, emotional nature of face-to-face exchange. Jessica suggested that "even if it became sometimes a bit too emotional you learned much more by this way. It was easier to understand what is important to them and what differs from us." Lucie suggested that "writing was definitely much easier – if I think to the second videoconference and Bobby [when she began to cry about the war]…phuuuu. Things like that don't happen while writing (or we just don't see it then)". In contrast to their

experiences with videoconferences, the German students found the following advantages of using e-mail with their distant partners:

Nicole	time to think about answers and questions (choice of words)/ greater variety of vocabulary/ opportunity to look up new words and put them directly into context/
Corinne	More time to think about the topics.
Sandra	Man hat mehr Zeit über seine Antworten nachzudenken und man hat ein Wörterbuch zur Hand.
Nadine	A written exchange gives you the chance to think about what you could write to represent a certain topic.
Iolanda	Topics can be discussed in a more extensive and detailed way. Gives us time to think about what we are going to write and gives us time to search for information.
Anna	- it's easier (you have time to think before, you can look up some words in a dictionary, you feel secure and can talk about personal matters more freely) you don't feel shy, embarrassed or afraid of making a mistake, it's more pleasant and comfortable talking to others in this way
Jessica	you can go into detailed explanation, and if you have time you can give many more examples to get your point across.
Sandra	You can think about your answers before you write them down. So you can make sure that you do not insult anybody. You do not have an immediate reaction to what you wrote.
Andreas	Can't become a heated discussion that fast, you got more time to collect your thoughts and formulate them, easier to stay objective.
Nina	When writing, you have got more time to express yourself much more appropriately and so you can probably avoid being misunderstood.
Monika	more in-depth analysis of the questions one-to-one contact, you can learn the person better
Nicole	you can take your time, think twice before you write sth. down, maybe you can avoid some misunderstandings you can read through it several times and the more you read the email the more you will be able to understand your partner's perspective because every time you read the email you will find sth. you have overlooked so far

Table 6.4 Advantages of using e-mail

From this list it is clear that the German students felt that, in comparison to videoconferencing, e-mail gave them more time to reflect on the topic at hand (see the comments by Nicole, Corinne, Sandra and Nadine among others), to explain their thoughts and feelings in a more detailed way (Iolanda, Jessica and Monika) and to search for examples to illustrate their points (Iolanda and Jessica). Interestingly,

Andreas also pointed out that interaction was less likely to become "heated" when interacting by e-mail. Feedback received from the American group on the same question revealed similar views. Teresa suggested that in the videoconferences "it is difficult to express or ask a question that entails an in-depth answer because of the time limit" while Tammy reported that "the e-mails were more personal and allowed the person to write longer and expand more and was not on a time restraint". Finally, Latasha explained her experiences of the two media in the following way: "I enjoyed the videoconference very much, but in the e-mails it's easier to open up, and get time for your thoughts before you write anything. With the videoconference you have to have a quick response, or question. Videoconference doesn't allow for much time."

It therefore becomes clear from the data presented here that videoconferencing will make a more effective contribution to developing learners' ICC if it is combined with asynchronous communication. In this way, teachers can use videoconferencing to develop students' ability to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and also to elicit through a natural face-to-face dialogue the concepts and values which underlie their behaviour and their opinions. These skills are at the heart of ethnographic fieldwork and are essentially Byram's skills of discovery and interaction (1997a: 52). E-mail, on the other hand, can be employed to both send and receive detailed information on the two cultures' products and practices as seen from the insider perspective (i.e. the *knowledge* component of ICC (Byram, 1997a: 51).) Learners can take as much time as they wish to describe in detail aspects of their own culture without feeling (as was obviously the case in the videoconferencing) that they are encroaching on the other students' opportunities to participate. E-mail texts also give learners the opportunity to develop their skills of interpreting and relating at a slower, less stressful pace. Both modes of communication together can contribute to the development of students' attitudes of openness and curiosity as they both involve contact with 'real people' from the target culture. Also, if the interaction is sufficiently analysed and discussed in their classes, both tools can also facilitate learners reflecting more on their own perspectives, products and practices and thereby developing their critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997a: 51-52).

Finally, it is also important to point out that the combination of both modes allowed students to step back a little and engage with their partners via e-mail in reflective

discussions on what had occurred during the videoconferences. Students used this opportunity to clear up misunderstandings from the 'face-to-face' sessions or to explain more clearly the issues which had arisen. The following e-mail extracts are taken from German students' mails to their partners after the first and second videoconferences respectively and they are illustrative of this point:

> Concerning my fellow student's statement concerning Turkish people, I have to say that I don't know exactly what she said, but we talked about that in class for a short time and it seemed to me that there was a certain misunderstanding. I don't think she wanted to express that Turkish people are looked down in our culture, but the problem is that many Turkish people don't want to integrate. Women don't learn the language, even little girls have to wear the head scarf, and they just stay with each other. That's a problem, of course, and some things shock me sometimes…

E-mail Extract 6.6

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Actually it [the videoconference] worked very well and I think both
sides, Americans and Germans, got some of their questions answered.
However some topics cropped up which showed us quite clearly that
there are some cultural differences between our both countries. A
big topic in the last video conference was the question of
possessing guns and the like. Your classmates told us that they see
it as their basic right to possess guns. I know that this is fixed
in the American constitution, but what I would like to know is, do
you have to do certain tests or the like if you want to possess a
gun? Or can you just go to a store and buy them without any
licence?
```

E-mail Extract 6.7

The first e-mail extract shows a German student attempting to clarify for her partner what Sylvia had meant when she spoke about the lack of integration of the Turkish community in Germany. The second extract shows a German student giving her partner her opinion on the second videoconference and then taking up the issue of gun control in the USA which had come up during the session and asking her partner to go into more detail about it. Scklickau (2000), in his investigation of German – American videoconferences, also recognised the value of combining e-mail contact with videoconferecing for this reason:

> "Erneut zeigt sich also die Notwendigkeit nicht nur intensiver Nachbearbeitung, sondern auch ein Hinweis auf den Nutzen des Einsatzes 'langsamer Kommunikationsmittel' in bestimmten Zusammenhängen. Nur so kann dem entgegengewirkt werden, dass sich aufgrund eines punktuellen Eindrucks gegenseitige Fehlinterpretationen entwickeln." (2000: 5)

Having now established the important contribution of videoconferencing to intercultural exchanges as well as exploring how it can best be combined with

'traditional' asynchronous communication tools, the following sections looks at how both mediums contributed to the application of ethnographic interviewing techniques.

6.5.3 On-line Ethnographic Interviewing

In his work on German-American on-line exchanges, Fischer reports on an argument which develops between a German and an American student about their respective educational systems and which one was 'better' than the other. After discussing both e-mails, he comes to the following conclusion:

> "Being right or wrong is not the issue here. This issue is: Has Joern listened to what Sherri is saying? If she thinks school provides challenges for students, that is her perception. And this perception is her interpretation of a social reality. Of course, Joern can say at a later stage that he thinks he is smarter than Sherri. But that attitude has nothing to do with what his task in the learning experience could have been: the research of Sheri's interpretation of a social reality." (1998: 64)

Like Fischer, I would suggest that engaging in research about how members of the target culture interpret their social reality should be considered, along with becoming more aware of one's own social reality, one of the central aims of intercultural telecollaboration. Ethnographic interviewing is a research tool which also has its aim the exploration of "people's perceptions, narrations and conceptualisations of their experience (Roberts et. al., 2001: 242)" and is therefore, I believed, ideally suited for developing such awareness using networked technologies. However, the outcome of this action research was to temper my belief somewhat. While students did become aware of how their partners' perspectives were shaped by historical, social and political factors (see essay extracts 6.1 from Nina, Ana and Sylvia in section 6.5.1), other data suggests that they inevitably proved unwilling to take on the stance of a researcher or ethnographer whose only aim was to explore and describe their partners' perceptions. Instead, like the German student in Fischer's example above, most students found themselves drawn into discussions on which culture was 'right or wrong' and their final essays and feedbacks often reveal them judging and criticising the target culture instead of trying to understand and describe it *from the native's point of view*. I will now explore the data in some detail and then speculate as to why the German students were relatively unsuccessful in carrying out their roles as ethnographers.

As was already reported in section 6.4.3, the German group were introduced to the concepts and techniques of ethnographic interviewing during the opening weeks of the exchange. Apart from reading texts and watching videos on the subject, they also carried out practice interviews on each other. After the exchange with Zanesville had been underway for a short time, I also created worksheets containing extracts from the Americans' e-mails. Together in class we discussed the structural and contrastive questions which we could ask the authors of these e-mails in order to delve more deeply into how these Americans experienced their own culture. An example of one of these worksheets can be seen below.

Asking Ethnographic Questions.

Here are some extracts from the e-mails which some of you received last week. If you received these e-mails, what ethnographic questions might you ask in order to find out the meanings which these people assign to their behaviour?

```
1. I am a poor college student so I still live with my family. We live
in a small town called Dresden (after Dresden, Germany).  The town is
small but has a great history and is in the Guinness Book of World
Records three times.  My family consists of my Mother, father, two
sisters, three dogs (Shelties), and one cat.

I am very active in my church.  I am the minister of technology there.
That just means I take care of all the purchasing and operation of the
audio, video, and recording equipment.

2. Young adults in this area are bored and usually hang out at each
other's houses. Other activities include going to the movies,
"cruising" the streets, camping, and drinking at the local tavern.
Wildlife is very abundant here. Hunting for deer and turkey are
popular activities.

3. The city that I live and work  in here in central Ohio is not very
culturally diverse.  I would estimate that the population in this area
85% Caucasian Americans. The other 15% of the population is a
combination of African-American, Chinese, and Mexican Americans.  I
enjoy observing people and the ways in which they communicate
and interact with one another.
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Class worksheet 6.1

Receiving information such as this in their e-mails provides learners with rich opportunities to learn more about what being a member of a church meant for someone in Ohio, or to discover a very different perspective on the significance of hunting. Regularly during our classes I reminded students that their aim should not be to argue or debate with their partners, but rather to find out how they experienced their own social reality. To emphasise this point, the class read and discussed an example taken from our first exchange (see section 4.4.5) in which an American student from Clemson describes

how she met her boyfriend in church and planned to marry him after a relatively short courtship. After their initial derisive laughter, I encouraged students to reflect on how church going meant something very different in this American cultural context compared to the cultural context of the Ruhrgebiet. For this reason, what was strange and incomprehensible to them, made sense in another context in which church going carried out both social as well as religious functions.

As the exchange developed, it became clear from the copies of the German students' e-mails which I was receiving that many of them were successfully integrating aspects of the ethnographic approach into their correspondence. Below are some representative examples of how students carried out their ethnographic research:

Grand Tour or Bull's Eye questions	Since we are studying to be teachers and that you work in a preschool, could you tell me what is a typical working day for you?
Listening carefully to what informant has to say and asking for more details	You wrote that it is a great achievement for the African American community that the both of them [Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice] are in the US government. Would you please put that into more concrete terms? In which way is this an achievement? Has it something to do with pride or anything else?
Listening to what informants have to say, showing interest and then asking structural questions.	We liked the description you made of Newark and there are some things we would like you to talk more about. For example: what are Longburger baskets or what do you mean by Indian Burial Mounds? We are curious to know more about that.

Table 6.5 Ethnographic interview techniques in e-mails

The feedback from students presented below illustrates students' reactions to employing ethnographic interview techniques in the first weeks of their exchanges with their partners.

Question	**Do you feel the idea of ethnographic interviewing is useful for our exchange? Has it helped you in any way?**
Nicole	Yes, it helped me improve my interviewing techniques. By using open questions at the beginning, it was easy for Maria, my partner, to find an aspect she would like to start with. Unfortunately when going into details, she didn't respond the way I wanted her to. She gave very short answers and went on to the next question or the next point to cover. That was a bit frustrating. So it was not that easy to get her to speak. But knowing about ethnographic interviews is an enrichment for further questioning. **[In her final essay, she returns to this same subject]** What's more, the interviewee gets the possibility not to react to an asked question, which is not that easy in face-to-face communication. It is difficult to lead a computer-mediated conversation - if it can be called a conversation at all - in the direction intended by the interviewer. Since there is no real "turn taking" existing, meaning one question followed by one answer, the interviewer asks more than just one question in one e-mail. As a result the interviewee might fail to notice or ignore one question he or she does not feel comfortable with.
Andi	It was definitely helpful. Some information I got out of it weren't new to me, but I also gathered some fresh insights and ideas about the Americans.
Frank	I think it is only one possibility to explain differences, but it still is a very interesting topic, so I think it helps as a first step to find something to talk about.
Nina	Yes, I think that the idea of ethnographic interviewing has helped me a lot in this exchange. I really try to pay attention to the way I answer my partners mails. Things like picking up what the other person says and asking for more details seem to be useful when collecting information. And I think that this makes your partner feel that you are really interested.
Nadine	It helped so far that we had to reflect how to ask the right" questions! It was good to understand the form of successful questions so that we have the chance to get lots of information.
Jessica	I think these ethnographical interviews were a great idea, I liked it. I found it extremely interesting. Much better than to learn from books and an interesting method for students like me who want to become teachers.
Lucie	It's definitely good to think about it, although this technique is really difficult - I'll have to work on it, because I think you get more information out of people.
Corinne	The concept of ethnographic interviewing is interesting and could be helpful to ask the good questions to your partner.
Sylvia	The fact that I had to write about more complicated topics in my email helped me a lot to test my English and my ability to express more complicated thoughts. When I write to my friends in England it's usually more

	about the things that are going on at the moment and we share jokes and information. We usually don't have discussions. That's why I think this is a great chance to improve and test my language skills.

Table 6.6 Reactions to using ethnographic interviewing techniques

In general, the feedback shows that the students appreciated knowing about the techniques as it provided them with a certain amount of guidance in how to engage their partners. As was seen in the past two chapters, engaging in intercultural exchanges is not something 'natural' for language learners. Carrying out cultural research in this context is something which needs to be learned and students appreciate training before they are immersed in the activity. Nicole mentions she used 'open questions' (i.e. referred to earlier as 'grand tour' questions) at the beginning in order not to impose an agenda on her partner and to allow her to speak about what was important to her. Nina reports having found another aspect of ethnographic interviewing useful when she explains that "picking up what the other person says and asking for more details seem to be useful when collecting information. And I think that this makes your partner feel that you are really interested". Nadine suggests that being introduced to the technique in general helped students to become aware of the fact that there are good and bad ways of taking part in an on-line exchange. Ethnographic interviewing is, of course, not the only way for students to find out information from their partners, but it can be a productive one.

The students' comments also reveal some of the problems they were having with employing the technique in the medium of e-mail. Nicole complained that due to the absence of instant turn-taking via e-mail, the American informants were often able to avoid or ignore questions which they did not wish to answer. At other times, she claimed, they refused to go into any great detail about the topics under discussion. Lucie also complained that the technique was "really difficult". This is probably not surprising as, due to time restraints, the students had received relatively little training before they had to begin their exchange.

Despite what I perceived to be the relative success of the students using the ethnographic approach, it emerged as the exchange went on that the German group was often unwilling to retain their stance as observers and 'cultural investigators'. An analysis of the videoconferences, their final interviews and their essays reveal a group

of learners who, like the German student in Fischer's example at the start of this sub-section, are trying to establish which of the two cultures is 'right' in their interpretation of issues and events. Inevitably, the majority concluded that their own culture held the moral high-ground. This had also occurred in chapter four when my class had encountered the American students' account of why she was marrying young and how she had met her partner at church. This is, of course, not what ethnography and intercultural learning involve.

The students' unwillingness to be aware of how their own worldview was influencing them in their exploration of the American groups' perspectives first became clear in the second videoconference during the exchange on gun control in the USA. Although this started off as an attempt by the Germans to find out more about the American perspective on this topic, it quickly turned into a debate as the following extract illustrates:

Monica (Germany): I want to ask you a question which might be a bit tough and it came up to my mind when Tony asked about the shootings. One thing I could never understand about America was the right for US citizens to possess guns. I thought this would stop after all the shootings you had in schools and so many innocent children died. This never happened and I would like to know what is the attitude of the society in general? Do you consider it as one of your natural laws to possess a gun?

[Silence from Americans for 30 seconds as they discuss among themselves]

Rachel (USA): In our constitution we have the right to bear arms. I personally believe this. Guns don't kill people, people kill people. It is the responsibility of that person if they take that gun and use it for violence. A lot of people use guns for sports such as hunting, competitions for shooting. I personally believe that people should be allowed to have guns as long as they are responsible. There are laws that protect the citizens.

[She looks to Tony]

Tony (USA): This is Tony and I'm going to give two viewpoints. The first one, I do believe we should have the right to bare arms for personal safety and for sport. But I'm a police officer also. And it's hard as a police officer, everyone you pull over you wonder if they have a gun. So I can see both viewpoints. As a police officer I don't think they should be allowed to carry guns. As a regular citizen I think we should have guns for sport.

Rachel (USA): There is an intense debate in this country whether people should have the right to bare guns. A lot of people would like stricter laws and a lot of people would like to just throw them out.

Teresa (USA): What is the law over there? Are civilians allowed to own arms or not?

Gregor (Germany): This is Gregor. Civilians are currently not allowed to carry guns or weapons. Only people who have a hunting licence and who have to be educated to be allowed to do this and its very formal to get such licences. You have to give certain reasons to carry them and handle them. That's how it is in Germany.

Lucie (Germany): You said people do sports with guns. But they carry them home again afterwards. I mean you could just leave them there at the …sports centre. You can't do sports at home.

Rachel (USA): Where I live out in the country I have a shooting range out the back of my house. My father and I both own guns and pistols and we do it to bond together. It's like a father daughter activity. We take targets out there and we practise shooting. We keep our guns locked in a safe with a combination lock as well. He gets the guns out and I do not have the combination lock. But we do keep our guns locked as well.

Tony (USA): This is Tony again. For me having guns is a skill. It allows you to bond, like she says. But not only that, it gives protection. In the United States we have a lot of crime and we want to protect ourselves.

Gregor (Germany): I would like to know how can you determine who has the right to have a gun and who is able to bare a gun. I don't know how you determine this right. How do you know if in his mental state a person can show responsibility?

Rachel (USA): There is a law, in fact, called the Brady law. The police do a three day background check. They check for crimes. This helps curb it but unfortunately some people do get guns should not be allowed to. But at least there are laws which try to stop this problem.

Sandra (Germany): Hi, this is Sandra. And Tony you have just said people need guns to protect themselves because there are so many crimes. But this is somehow like a vicious circle. Because these people who do crime…commit crimes…they get guns easier too. So this is somehow paradox, I think.

> **Tony (USA):** It's a paradox in a way but it's the American view that they should be able to protect themselves.
> **Andi (Germany):** This seems to be a topic which everyone is interested in. I watched a movie called 'Bowling for Columbine'. It won an Oscar for best documentary this year. And he made comments similar to Rachel saying people, not guns are killing each other. What do you think can help to prevent people from becoming violent , especially in the suburban areas of the United States?
> **Rachel (USA):** We definitely need more community support. We have a lot of social problems over here. Fatherless children. Poverty. A lot of people need help. And this desperation leads them to drugs, gangs an to find support….

Videoconferencing Extract 6.2

Although the atmosphere of this exchange was not one of heated debate, it is clear that the German students were engaged in doing more than trying to establish the Americans' *emic* perspective. From the very beginning, when Monica prefaces her question to the American with the statement "One thing I could never understand about America was the right for US citizens to possess guns", it is clear to the American group that one of their cultural practices is being called into question and they are expected to either defend it or accept that they were wrong. Similarly, the comments which come later from the German group all carry with them challenges to the Americans' explanations. Lucie suggests that "You said people do sports with guns. But they carry them home again afterwards. I mean you could just leave them there at the …sports centre. You can't do sports at home", while Sandra dismisses Tony's explanation with the comment "Tony you have just said people need guns to protect themselves because there are so many crimes. But this is somehow like a vicious circle…". It seems that instead of trying to understand the American perspective, the Germans want to show them the error of their ways. When I asked Sandra, one of the German students, in an e-mail interview whether I was right to interpret the videoconference in this way, she sent me the following answer:

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You are right saying that we were trying to prove the Americans wrong
most of the time. The questions we ask are often meant to be
rhetorical like when Gregor says "How do you know if in his mental
state a person can show responsibility?" The answer here of course can
only be "We don't know." So we are trying to put the Americans into a
position where they have to admit being wrong. During the
videoconferences I sometimes felt like in court. Nevertheless, I do
not regret having talked about even the heavy stuff. I think that it
is something natural trying to persuade each other that one's own
viewpoint is right.
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E-mail Extract 6.8

It is interesting that she says the videoconferences "felt like a court" and that it is "natural" to engage in this type of debate with people from different cultures. This attitude was confirmed in the students' final essays. In reference to this videoconference exchange, Nina revealed her critical approach to the foreign culture when she wrote that "*our criticism* about this [the American's explanation that it was a constitutional right], was that, according to statistics, most murderers in the USA are committed by the use of guns (italics added)". Later she wrote, in reference to Rachel's comment that shooting was a bonding activity for her and her father: "While others play tennis with their parents, she fires guns in order to bond with her Dad." The irony of the sentence leaves the reader in no doubt of her opinion of this cultural practice.

After reading her essay and studying the videoconferences, I asked Nina why she had 'abandoned' the ethnographic approach to her exchange and had instead adopted a more confrontational and critical approach. Her e-mailed reply produced some revealing insights. First of all, she began by explaining how she started out the exchange:

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I had expected my partner and me to exchange information and tell each
other about our culture and our way of life. Of course I was aware of
the fact that differences would occur (because of the stereotypes and
the prejudices we have about the United States of America and its'
citizens). So I decided to just accept a different viewpoint and not
to try to persuade him/her that the way the Germans, especially myself
think about certain issues is the better one. This is not the right
way to talk to a stranger, I still think. All this was before the
first emails and videoconferences. When talking about different
attitudes towards religion, role of women or education, I still felt
relaxed. I always just answered saying things like "That's rather
interesting. Well, in Germany we do it a different way. We…". I did
not mean to prove her wrong, but to make her understand that in
another part of the world, things are being treated differently. Up to
that point, my personal exchange remained the way you describe above
(i.e. I had imagined that the exchange should be about finding out
about the social and cultural context in the USA which make these
people think and behave as they do). We were trying to understand each
other and find out about what makes us think the way we think.
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E-mail Extract 6.9

Nina explains that she had set out with the intention of carrying out the exchange as ethnographic research and that she had not intended to "persuade him/her that the way the Germans, especially myself think about certain issues is the better one". However, her approach then changed for a particular reason:

But when it came to the questions of whether the war against Iraq was good or whether every citizen should be allowed to possess guns, I changed my mind. I just could not understand the Americans, especially my partner, anymore. The reason for that may be the fact that back then, the war was something that had been in the media for almost a year, I guess and which everyone was into. (I remember that the discussion about Saddam Hussein possessing weapons of mass destruction had begun even before the elections on September 22nd here in Germany). The war had just been over and I think that everyone of us still had the pictures in mind showing children with terribly burnt bodies, people who had lost their homes and families with all their children having died when the house was bombed. I think that there was and still is a lot of hatred against president Bush here in Germany, and I think that people over here wonder why the US citizens have elected him for president. To put it briefly, my personal viewpoint is that all the incidents were still too recent to talk about them more objectively. Maybe it was just not the right time for an exchange with American students. Maybe a discussion with people from Australia would have been more peaceful.

The same may be true about the discussion about gun control. If you had asked me a year ago, I would not have had such a "strong" opinion as I do now. The explanation for that is quite simple. It is the documentary which I also quote in my essay, "Bowling for Columbine" by Michael Moore. I first saw it in March this year and it impressed me very deeply. There are interviews and statistics in it that prove that there most be something wrong with the constitutional law in the USA. Furthermore, there are some real video extracts from the Columbine High School in Littleton, where several young people were killed when two students were shooting like crazy. I know that this is media representation, too, and that media can also be wrong, but these pictures don't lie. So don't statistics, I hope. To me, this documentary made me think about the possession of guns more deeply. I am absolutely against the law and I don't understand how someone could ever support it.

E-mail Extract 6.10

Her comments show that she was unable to stand back and take a scientific approach to the exchange due to the emotional nature of the topics. Her experiences of the recent war in Iraq and her viewing of a film on gun control in the USA meant that she could not "talk about them more objectively". The principles and values of the American group seem to have collided completely with her own and she felt obliged to reject them instead of trying to find out where they come from.

Similarly, Sandra, in the conclusion of her essay, is very dismissive of what she has learned from the American group:

> What did I learn from this exchange? Recently, Donald Rumsfeld, Foreign Secretary of the United States, spoke depreviatively of "the old Europe". For many people in Germany and the rest of Europe, America always seems to be somehow like a role model only because of the movies they have seen. People seem to forget that life is not like a Hollywood movie. The United States also have to deal with serious problems such as financial crisis, economical crisis, educational crisis, war and terror. I cannot make a good statement about American people because I do not really know one but to me it often seems as if they believe that they are more progressive than the rest of the world. What I have learned is that so-called "old Europe" is in some way more progressive than the United States and that nowadays America should better be called the land of 'limited' opportunities.

Essay Extract 6.2

The outcome of her investigations are clear. Germany has been compared to the USA and Germany has emerged as being the better off. This is probably a natural reaction among learners when they encounter cultural perspectives different to their own. However, this does not necessarily mean it is a desirable outcome of intercultural exchanges. A further example may illustrate the point more clearly. Gregor concludes his essay in the following way:

> [After discussing his and his partners' differing opinions on the Iraq war] This was the point I realized that her argumentation is totally opposed to everything I believe in….the differences in our attitudes towards this topic made a discussion about it impossible. The only motivation was at this point to gather enough information to write our essays…

Essay Extract 6.3

Despite our work on the principles and techniques on ethnography in our classes, Gregor does not appear to have realised that the object of the exchange was not to find agreement on the topics under discussion but instead to become more aware of the social, historical and political factors *which had shaped their opinions and beliefs*. Instead of rejecting *what* their partners believed, the German group would probably have learned more if they had asked *why do they believe this*?

It is perhaps important at this stage to pause and refer again to what exactly students should be learning from their intercultural contact. First of all, at no stage did I want the students to be convinced by the Americans' ideas and to believe that they should somehow 'take on' the American perspective. Such an approach would be in the mould of a very old-fashioned *Landeskunde* in which the students are presented the target

culture as being something superior to their own. This is not the aim of modern approaches to intercultural learning. Neither was it expected that the German and American students would be able to find agreement on the issues which had emerged as salient in their exchange. Americans and Germans had come to the exchange with such different social and historical backgrounds that it was highly unlikely that they could some how find a compromise agreement on what should happen in Iraq or how gun ownership should be regulated in a western society. As Kramsch points out, neither is this the point of intercultural learning in any case: "The goal is not a balance of opposites, or a moderate pluralism of opinions, but a paradoxical confrontation that may change one in the process (1993: 231)." As was seen in chapter one, Kramsch sees a 'third place' which locates learners at an objective standpoint between both cultures as the ideal goal for intercultural learning.

Byram's interpretation of what should be the outcome of intercultural contact can be found in his objectives related to critical cultural awareness. The intercultural speaker, he states, "can use a range of analytical approaches to place a document or event in context (of origins / sources, time, place, other documents or events) and to demonstrate the ideology involved" (1997a: 63). I understand this as being essentially the ability to identify the cultural context which gives meaning to people's beliefs and actions. In this case, the "document or event" which needs to be analysed is the American group's perspective on, for example, gun control. The context in which it needs to be seen probably involves historical reasons (the role of guns in self-defence when Ohio was still part of the American frontier), political factors (the importance students attribute to their rights as American citizens) and modern day social issues (the need to have guns in order to hunt, take part in competitions in the local community and, apparently, even to bond with members of your family). The German group were actually given a lot of this contextual information, both directly and indirectly, in the videoconference and in their e-mails, but many of them chose to ignore it and insisted on concentrating on their own beliefs (themselves products of a cultural context) that the Americans' reasons did not justify their liberal gun laws.

Before I put forward my suggestions as to why I believe members of the German group were unwilling to limit themselves to their roles as ethnographers and instead engaged in a debate between cultural perspectives, it is important to emphasise again

that their essays and feedbacks also showed signs of intercultural learning and of students' becoming aware of the different cultural contexts influenced their and their partners' perspectives. The essay extracts 6.1 are examples of this, for example. Furthermore, in an interview via e-mail, Nina wrote the following about what she had learned from her e-mail partner: "Although our viewpoints to religion were as different as they could be, I found it interesting getting to know how belief and faith in God can determine and influence a person's way of life and his or her viewpoint upon issues." In her essay, Nadine wrote the following:

In the African-American as well as in the German culture, a feeling of pride is deeply rooted in the cultures' respective histories. As stated above, a feeling of pride in the German culture is influenced by history as well, but in another and somehow conflicting way compared to the African-American culture - undoubtedly because of the dark period of history Germany went through in the 1930s and 1940s of the 20th century. Quite the reverse to African-Americans, Germans might react somehow embarrassed when they are asked concerning their feeling of pride – not knowing what to say.

Essay Extract 6.4

Nina's comments and Nadine's essay showed learners who have gained insights into different cultural contexts and have begun to understand how they influence behaviour and beliefs. Similarly, despite the fact that Gregor is quite critical of his partners' attitudes throughout his essay, he does admit that:

some arguments were convincing and showed me that her motivation for her way of thinking was simple fear. This fear is founded in the aspect that the US and its inhabitants has been confronted with something it has never been experienced before – an attack of an external power with means as simple as effective. This totally new situation changed the life of a whole nation.

Essay Extract 6.5

There are no guarantees that these students are right in their theories as to why Americans believe and act in the ways they do. I wonder if the American attitude to Iraq can simply be put down to "simple fear" as Gregor postulates. However, I would argue along with Fischer (1998: 188) that the important thing here is that the students are looking beyond the behaviour to the meaning it has for the informants and they are asking why it has come to have this meaning. In section 1.4.3.2, it was seen that the three questions at the heart of ethnography were: What is going on?, What meaning does it have? and How does it come to have these meanings? (Roberts et. al., 2001:

118). The examples above show learners looking for answers to the second and third of these questions. However, despite this awareness, they were inevitably unwilling to 'accept' the American perspective as merely data for their cultural investigations and instead were drawn into a debate on how justified these perspectives were.

Based on the data collected here, I would suggest the following reasons as to why students were unable to treat this project as a piece of ethnographic research on the target culture. First of all, this project was not a typical ethnographic situation in which there were one group of informants and one group of ethnographers. This was an exchange which required both groups to provide both questions and answers to the topics at hand. This is a very different relationship to the traditional one of ethnographer and informant. As such, comparison and debate were perhaps inevitable as the German group had to present their perspectives and accounts at the same time that they received those coming from the American group. This was especially true when students began to exchange their perceptions of emotional topics such as war, multicultural societies and gun control, it proved too difficult to simply accept and try to understand perceptions and values which appeared to be completely incompatible with their own. The feedback from Sandra and Nina (e-mail extracts 6.8 and 6.10) would appear to confirm this hypothesis.

The second reason for their inability to be true ethnographers is related to the strategies which learners used to gain insights from their partner. It was evident at several stages during the exchange that students were using a strategy to find out more about the American perspectives which is not characteristic of ethnography but may nevertheless be suited to intercultural exchanges. This strategy is illustrated in the following comment by Sylvia to her partner in one of her e-mails: "That's why I think that our email exchange is very important. We are able to write about our impressions and can try to correct them if we think it's not reality in our eyes."

Regularly throughout the exchange, students would make statements to their partners about how they interpreted about the target culture and then they would wait for their partner to either agree with this statement of correct it. Some examples of this are presented below. The first is taken from a videoconference:

> **Nadine (Germany):** This is Nadine again. Would you relate this decision pro-war to what happened September 11. That is something I would understand. That happened in your country and this was a war of revenge which made you feel better. Would you agree with that?
> **Teresa (USA):** I'll answer that. I don't think that it was so much revenge but everything changed on September 11th. This is the first time in a long time that the USA was an aggressor in a war and that's an example how things have changed in this country since that day.

Videoconference Extract 6.3

Here Nadine presents her theory as to why the United States have adapted an aggressive foreign policy and then checks with the American group to see if they agree with this. In the same way, Günther, writing in an e-mail, puts the following belief about his own culture to his partner and waits for her reaction:

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I know how Germans are seen in many other countries and I am really
sorry that many people treat Germans with prejudices because I know
that we have one of the best and most democratic governments around
the world. The German society is a multi-cultural one and especially
in our region people from all around the world live door to door.
How do you think about that?
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E-mail Extract 6.11

Describing his own government as "one of the best and most democratic governments around the world" and then asking his partner what her opinion is about appears to be almost a provocation on the part of the German student in order to find out her true opinion of Germany and thereby to increase his own knowledge about how Germany is viewed in other countries. In his final feedback, Günther seemed to confirm that this had been his strategy for finding out more about the foreign culture and adapting his opinions: " I hoped to find some of my clichés about American society refuted, but either they are rooted too solid, or my partner didn't come up with convincing arguments." Instead of trying to find out more about the context in which the American behaviour was located, Günther, and many others appeared to be looking to their partners for an intensive exchange in which theories and stereotypes about both cultures were put forward and debated before being confirmed or rejected. As Sandra mentioned when she spoke about the videoconferences: "I think that it is something natural trying to persuade each other that one's own viewpoint is right." Sandra may be right, trying to persuade someone else that their opinions and beliefs are wrong is quite natural. However, in intercultural exchanges such an approach is usually futile and is it not the goal of ethnographic research. Nevertheless, this 'technique' would appear to be

very common among learners in intercultural exchanges. In the first of the exchanges to be researched in this thesis, I identified students interacting in this way in the Cultura message board (see section 4.5). Again in chapter five, the German students on the message board often presented their stereotypical images of Ireland and indirectly 'challenged' their Irish partners to prove them wrong (see section 5.6.2.3). In a previous study (O'Dowd, 2003), a Spanish student (see the account of Manuel, p. 234) also used this approach in order to engage his e-mail partner in dialogue.

In conclusion, I would suggest that these two reasons as to why students abandoned the ethnographic approach to their exchange are not mutually exclusive and are probably both partly responsible for the critical, confrontational tone of many of the German group's essays and feedback. Firstly, the symmetrical nature of class-to-class projects require the exchange of perspectives from both sides and if these perspectives prove to be very different on certain subjects, then this will inevitably lead to conflict and disagreement and learners will want to move from simply learning about the foreign perspective to challenging it. Secondly, students seem to have a common strategy for eliciting information from their partners which involves proposing a theory or belief about either the home or foreign cultures and then expecting their partners to accept or reject this with, in the words of Günther, "convincing arguments". If they are not convinced by what they receive from their partners, then they can allow themselves to assume that their theories and negative images of the target culture are justified.

What then can be done to avoid students drawing rather critical conclusions from their intercultural contact? Teachers could attempt to establish more one-way, asymmetrical projects with contacts in the target culture which would more closely resemble the relationship between ethnographer and informant. Such projects are already quite well known and are described by Eck, Legenhausen and Wolff (1995: 99-101) as 'open projects'. Nevertheless, it may be difficult to find members of the target culture (especially classes of students) which are willing to supply information about their culture and lives and yet not expect the other group not to reciprocate with similar information on their own culture.

A second, perhaps more realistic option is to train learners more extensively in ethnographic techniques and to make them more aware of the ideal outcomes of

intercultural contact. When learners become more conscious that their aim is not to debate with their partners but rather to understand how they experience their worlds and why this is so, then they may become more objective in their approaches and less willing to expect their partner to change all the stereotypes which they have of the target culture. As was pointed out earlier in the chapter, the German class had had relatively little time to become acquainted with the principles and techniques of ethnography and this may have been the reason why they were unable to maintain their stance as ethnographers. Further work on this method may have led them to focus less on a 'right and wrong' attitude to cultural difference. It is interesting to note that the Ealing Project on Ethnography for language learning which was described in detail in chapter one has also encountered the tendency among learners to judge the behaviour of their informants by their own cultural values. Jordan (2002) reports that when students are writing up their ethnographic studies after they have finished their fieldwork they often find themselves "slipping into inappropriate value judgements (2002: 344)" and need their tutors to help them become aware of their own assumptions and prejudices.

While this outcome of the project inevitably raises questions about the suitability of applying ethnographic methods to telecollaboration, the research data does reveal one particularly positive aspect which Roberts et. al. (2001) did not find when they reviewed the outcome of students using ethnographic techniques on their year abroad. This will be looked at briefly in the following sub-section.

6.5.4 Reflection on the Home Culture

It was seen in 1.4.3.2 that Robert's et. al. (2001) had found that students carrying out ethnographic projects had generally failed to reflect on their own pre-suppositions about their home cultures or about their own cultural values and principles. They suggested that this was due to the lack of explicit focus on this aspect by the course trainers and also because self-reflection was still a relatively unknown outcome of foreign language learning. Foreign language education had, for the most part, been unwilling to bring learners to "to face difference and the challenge of 'denaturalisation' of the all-too-familiar" (2001: 219). In contrast to these results, the research showed that this project of virtual ethnography had brought the German learners to reflect a great deal on their own culture and on the underlying principles and values which influence their own behaviour.

I believe that the project was more successful in this area than the project of Roberts et. al. because the Essen students had to operate both as ethnographers *and* as informants. As was seen in the previous projects in chapters four and five, by having to describe their own culture to their partners, students are forced to put into words (and to make understandable) aspects of their lives which they had probably never reflected on before. This awareness of one's own culture and the ability to describe it is an integral part of ICC.

Some evidence of how the German students were brought to reflect on their own culture and their own values and principles can be seen below in the following student feedback on the task of having to describe their own culture to their American partners:

Sylvia	Sometimes we found it hard to explain some aspects of the German culture, especially because we also did not understand quite well the reasons of such behaviour or views. Nevertheless, we tried to be as clear as possible while explaining these topics and we were also concerned in giving our own opinions on every topic and to talk about our own experiences whenever we considered they would be helpful.
Andi	I feel it was a very interesting experience. Though answering my partners questions wasn't always as easy as I thought it would when we started this project. Talking about one's own culture and explain it to a foreigner is more work than I expected, since it is nothing you do very often.
Frank	I think it is quite difficult to explain some things, but I do not believe that the English language is the problem, I think the same problems would appear, if I would be writing in German. **[When asked to explain more about what he meant by this, Franl wrote the following:]** There is nothing special that is difficult to describe, it's just the situation here in Germany, which is in some parts very different from the USA, and some things are normal here in Germany, which need to be explained to the foreigner, because otherwise he or she would not understand exactly what I mean, and maybe get a completely wrong picture of what I wanted to tell. The same would happen, if I would be writing in German, because I would forget those "little" but important things.
Günther	Some of the existing differences are obviously hard to explain, since underlying cultural values and priorities can hardly be discussed. Some of them seem to be like axioms.
Ana	Sometimes, I found it quite difficult to tell my email partner about our culture. I think that I am so used to most of the issues we discussed that I usually just do not think about them. It is sometimes hard to explain why things are the way they are. But I must admit that I have learned a lot when I occupied myself with collecting information about e.g. my home town and the Ruhrgebiet.
Nadine	I think it's not so difficult to explain aspects of my home culture and make people understand how I experience, e.g. religion or nationalism in my country. Furthermore, I think that explaining those things to people who don't know them at all makes us grasp our own culture in a better way. Probably, we wouldn't think about the topics we are discussing with our email partners in such an intensity without an intercultural exchange.

Table 6.7 Reactions to describing the home culture

The comments by Nadine and Ana show students who have reflected on aspects of the home culture in a way which they had not done before. Nadine admits that the

exchange "makes us grasp our own culture in a better way", while Ana reported having learned a great deal about her own area due to the questions she had received from her partner. The answers by Sylvia, Frank and Günther reveal, not only that they had been brought to reflect on their own culture, but also that learners can have great difficulties putting into words what, until then, they had taken for granted. Sylvia recognises that it was hard to explain their own cultural behaviour because "we did not understand quite well the reasons of such behaviour or views". Frank explained that what foreigners need to find out about are the little details which a native might take for granted, while Günther points out that "underlying cultural values and priorities can hardly be discussed. Some of them seem like axioms".

This confirms the findings in the previous chapter (section 5.6.2.4) that acting as an informant about one's home culture is not something which comes naturally and is a challenging skill of ICC which needs to be developed through practice and awareness raising. While intercultural exchanges such as this one may provide practice in the development of this skill, 'traditional' ethnographic projects which do not require learners to focus on their own culture as well as the target culture may fail to develop this important aspect of ICC.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter continued to explore the central question of this thesis, namely, how NBLT, and in particular telecollaboration, can contribute to foreign language learners' ICC. Having established an exchange between my class and a group in Zanesville, Ohio, I examined how videoconferencing and e-mail communication tools could be exploited to develop learners' skills as ethnographic interviewers. From this study, two major research findings emerged. Firstly, it became clear how different communication tools can contribute to different aspects of ICC. Secondly, the research findings also illustrated how difficult it can be for teachers to develop in learners critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997a). Each of these two points will now be summarised briefly.

First of all, the different types of interaction via videoconferencing and via e-mail meant that students were able to use both media to achieve different goals and learn in different ways about the target culture. Students found that videoconferencing allowed them to bond and get to know each other better, it allowed for quick and honest exchanges of questions and answers as well as the clarification of meaning, and it also enabled them to receive multiple answers to their questions about the target culture. The medium also proved to be more prone to misunderstandings and disagreement than e-mail as students were unable to avoid or ignore awkward subjects. In this sense, the medium proved to be very suitable for developing learners' skills of discovery and interaction in real time. E-mail, on the other hand, proved suitable for sending and receiving more in-depth and extensive descriptions of the two cultures. It also allowed learners more time to reflect on what they were sending and receiving. The e-mail content provided learners with more detailed and well-explained data about the foreign culture which they could analyse and use as a starting point for further investigation. This may make this communication tool most ideally suited for developing knowledge about the target culture as well as the skills of interpreting and relating. Obviously, a combination of both communication tools is ideal for a comprehensive development of ICC.

The second main finding of this chapter is related to why the German group were relatively unsuccessful in carrying out their role as ethnographic interviewers. In was seen in chapter one that Bredella described intercultural understanding as the ability to

"reconstruct the context of the foreign, take the others' perspective and see things through their eyes" (2002: 39). The research here demonstrated that, while students were often able to identify the context in which the American behaviour and beliefs were located, they were unwilling to stand back from their own culture and accept this behaviour and beliefs as being the product of another cultural context. Instead, they choose to compare it to their own and then reject the alternative as being 'wrong' or 'unconvincing'. This was especially the case for issues about which the learners felt particularly strongly.

I concluded from this that teachers need to emphasise to learners that it is necessary for them to abstract themselves from debates about which group's cultural values and beliefs are right or wrong as this is a futile activity and one which is inevitably doomed to failure. Instead, learners need to see themselves more as young social scientists or ethnographers who are objectively researching the cultural context which influences and shapes the way their partners see the world. Their task is not to agree or disagree with their partners, but rather to learn more about their partners' world – and their own. As in the two previous chapters, it becomes evident that intercultural exchanges do not involve a 'natural' approach to seeing foreign behaviour. Therefore, students involved in telecollaborative projects need to receive explicit guidance in developing cultural awareness. Further training in ethnography and in other intercultural learning activities (such as those described in section 1.4.2) are likely to help develop this attitude of openness to alternative perspectives on one's own and the target culture.

As the criticism and the disagreements between the two groups came about during discussions of topics which were very current and of great importance to both groups, it is interesting to consider whether such topics should not be avoided in future exchanges. It could be argued that if the chosen topics had carried less emotional weight, then students may have been more successful in retaining their role as ethnographers. Nevertheless, I would suggest that it is likely that students will inevitably have to discuss such 'hot topics' with members of the foreign culture in the future and therefore they need to be prepared for these challenges in their classes as well. Avoiding these issues does not mean that differences will cease to exist between the two cultures.

7. Conclusion

"On-line exchanges should be integrated into the regular classes in the way which the teacher finds most effective. When students are left to themselves they lose interest in the process fairly soon. As any other teaching/learning process, this should be well-planned, organized and controlled – then it brings results"
Gallina -, Ukrainian teacher of EFL writing in personal correspondence with this author.

7.1 Looking Back

This thesis set out to look at how Network-based Language Teaching can contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence in university level foreign language learners. Chapter one reviewed different interpretations of culture learning in the foreign language classroom and identified Byram's model on ICC (1997a) as a comprehensive, practical approach to developing learners' ability to interact with members of other cultures. Chapter two appraised how the cultural dimension of foreign language education had been dealt with through the different stages of CALL. The chapter also established various characteristics of NBLT which can be seen as potentially beneficial for the development of ICC in language learners. In my own action research, reported in chapters four, five and six, the main focus was on the outcome of intercultural telecollaboration through e-mail, message boards and videoconferencing. The potential of hypermedia-based on-line content was also examined in chapter five. In this final chapter I will now attempt to draw together the results of my three studies and to explore the consequences which this research may have for the areas of network-based intercultural learning, foreign language teacher education, as well as the cultural dimension of foreign language education in general.

7.2 Network-Based Language Teaching and Intercultural Communicative Competence

NBLT activities were seen to support the development of students' ICC in a number of ways. First of all, telecollaborative exchanges were seen to contribute to culture learning by providing learners with a different type of knowledge to that which they usually find in textbooks and in other traditional Cultural Studies resources. As opposed to objective factual information, the accounts which students received from their partners were of a subjective and personalised nature. Instead of giving facts and figures about, for example, multiculturalism in the USA or the role of nationalism in Ireland, the German students received accounts of how their partners viewed living in a multicultural society and read about how proud their partners were to be Irish. For this reason, the exchanges were particularly useful for making students' aware of certain aspects of Byram's cultural knowledge (1997a: 51) such as how institutions are perceived in the target culture, and what are the significant events and people in the target culture's 'national memory'.

Secondly, in all three classes it became evident that telecollaboration can best contribute to the development of critical cultural awareness when it involves periods of intense negotiation of meaning, explicit comparison of the two cultures and direct opinions and reactions on the submissions of others. Such dialogue between partners contrasts greatly with interaction which involves a mere exchange of information between partners. (The differentiation between such dialogic exchange and mere exchanges of information bares great similarity to Lamy and Goodfellows' (1999) differentiation between monologues and reflective dialogues referred to in section 2.4.4.) Negotiation of meaning was seen to occur, for example, when American and German students discussed and compared their interpretations of the *Cultura* questionnaires in chapter four (section 4.5). Here, instead of simply posting monologues which did not engage in social interaction, students' posts referred directly to the content of each other's writing and encouraged their partners to respond and clarify their beliefs and meanings. Similarly, when students on the message board with Dublin in chapter five offered their opinions about the target culture and openly contrasted aspects of the two cultures, this too represented an engagement in dialogue and a willingness to negotiate meaning with their partners. The intense exchanges via videoconference and e-mail in chapter six also had stages which involved the

negotiation of meaning, but the 'debates' on gun control or the war in Iraq which followed were not very supportive of critical cultural awareness. In these cases, learners tried to impose their own cultural beliefs on their partners instead of trying to find out more about the social reality which had brought the Americans to see things in a different way.

Thirdly, it also emerged from the research that NBLT can best support the development of ICC when a combination of different on-line tools and media is used. By applying different tools to different functions, students in these classes were able to work on a greater range of ICC components. In chapter five, for example, the combination of web units and an intercultural exchange on the Linguistics Online message board meant that students were given structured practice in the skills of interpreting and relating and were also given the opportunity to practise their skills of discovery and interaction in an authentic context. The on-line information on Ireland and the related tasks trained learners how to identify the meanings which Irish people attached to their behaviour and also improved their ability to compare cultures. The message board, on the other hand, gave them an opportunity to interact with members of the target culture and to elicit information from them. Similarly, in chapter six, the combination of videoconferencing and e-mail modes of communication meant that learners had access to in-depth written descriptions about the target culture which they could study and reflect on in their written correspondence but they also could engage in 'life-like' discussions in the videoconferences which permitted them to clarify doubts and details and also to discuss issues together as a group.

However, although the research demonstrated that NBLT can support intercultural learning in many ways, the findings are overshadowed by another which should be considered of even greater significance. All three studies revealed that the definition of culture, and the skills of interaction and analysis which are necessary for the success of intercultural telecollaboration do not come naturally to students. For this reason, in order for students to truly benefit from intercultural exchanges, it is necessary for them to receive explicit guidance and training in various aspects of intercultural telecollaboration. First of all, students need support in developing an anthropological definition of culture which focuses more on the meanings which members of the target culture attribute to their behaviour rather than on the behaviour itself. Secondly, they

need to develop various skills of on-line interaction and investigation, which include establishing a productive working relationship with their partners, being able to ask perceptive questions about the target culture and the ability to give insightful descriptions about their own culture. Finally, learners also need to develop their ability to analyse and understand the cultural content which they receive in their on-line interaction.

It would appear that these are all aspects of electronic literacies which have not been sufficiently developed in the models outlined earlier in section 2.5. This finding is particularly relevant as many teachers appear to engage their learners in telecollaboration with the expectation that they will automatically learn about the other culture from the experience. However, the research here demonstrates that unless learners are trained in how to engage in intercultural telecollaboration then they will be less likely to benefit form their experiences and to develop their ICC.

Evidence of this could be found in all three classes. Students in the classes reported on in chapters four and five often demonstrated a 'facts and figures' definition of culture and consequently understood their on-line activities as exercises in collecting facts about the target culture. In all three studies, learners were often seen to engage in on-line behaviour which hindered the development of a good working relationship with their partners or failed to elicit insights into their partners' social reality. For example, the e-mail exchange in chapter four often revealed a superficial exchange of information instead of any intense negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, many students proved to be unaware of how to ask effective questions to their partner. In the message board exchange in chapter five, the lack of posts containing reflection on the target culture or comparison of both cultures showed that students were unclear as to the difference between simply exchanging information and exploring and contrasting the different cultural perspectives. Students in the study in chapter five also reported having difficulty explaining their own culture to their partners in a manner which illustrated the meanings which certain products and practices had for them. In chapter six, while the German students were often able to elicit from their partners the meanings which they attributed to their behaviour, they were at times unable to maintain an objective standpoint and often rejected the American group's perspective as being mistaken or wrong.

It was also clear from the research that the responsibility for dealing with such skill development falls firmly on the teacher. For this reason, the following section examines what is required of teachers in on-line intercultural learning.

7.3 The Role of the Teacher in NBLT and Implications for Teacher Education

It became evident in this research that on-line exposure alone will not help learners to improve their skills of discovery and interaction, their critical cultural awareness and their skills of relating and interpreting. Intercultural contact should therefore go hand in hand with explicit teacher guidance and training in how the home and target cultures differ from each other and how one can find out more about these differences from members of the target culture. If the on-line virtual contact is sufficiently integrated with classroom-based learning, then the teachers and students have an amazing opportunity to base their intercultural language learning in an authentic and meaningful activity. The student interview extracts with regard to the message board in chapter five (section 5.6.3.4) confirm how explicit training in the skills of on-line intercultural interaction can help learners to achieve their goals and can make them more aware of what intercultural learning involves. In chapter six, the German students also reported that their training in ethnographic interviewing techniques had helped them understand the aims of their intercultural exchange and had provided them with guidelines as to how they could interact with their partner.

This finding means that it is necessary to pay greater attention to the role of the teacher in NBLT. During my work with the three classes, the following teacher roles emerged as vital for the development of students' ICC in the context of telecollaborative projects. In is interesting to contrast these roles with the perception of the on-line teacher as merely being a facilitator of learning processes whose function is to organise the projects and to trouble-shoot any problems which may emerge.

- **Organiser:** All networked projects reported here required a great deal of preparation and coordination on the part of all teachers involved. Teachers had to find appropriate partner classes, to establish appropriate activities, 'ground rules' and assessment criteria and also they had to find ways to smoothly integrate the exchanges into their curricula. In order to make the students' interaction the basis of our in-class learning as much as possible, it was also necessary for me to trawl the numerous e-mails or message board posts to find examples of good or bad practice as well as cultural 'rich points' which would then form the content of worksheets and activities.

- **Intercultural partner:** Apart from organising the exchange in my own class, it was also necessary for me to negotiate an agreed plan of action with partner teachers who I had never met before. This involved regular e-mails and phone calls in an attempt to establish a good working relationship, making them aware of the cultural and institutional context within which my students and I were working and also finding out more about their own context. As time went on, I became more conscious of how cultural and institutional differences could influence how teachers wanted to structure their projects. I therefore learned to be more explicit when explaining how I saw the exchange developing and I found that regular short mails to one's partner can often serve a function of support and trust-building in these complex relationships.

- **Model and Coach**: As already mentioned, in the contact classes themselves there were often stages when I found it necessary to act as a model for learners in the process of creating and analysing on-line interaction. This was particularly true in chapter four when it was necessary to illustrate to learners how they might analyse the *Cultura* questionnaire responses, but it was also the case when the students reported being unsure how to carry out ethnographic interviews in their e-mails and in the videoconferences (section 6.5.2). As on-line intercultural communication is usually a completely new form of discourse for learners, teachers must be willing to regularly assume their role of expert and to model examples of how learners can effectively interact on-line and analyse data from the foreign culture.

- **Source and Resource:** As was seen in chapter four, the information which students receive from their partners about the target culture is often of a very personalised nature. This may also be only one student's view of the world and, while it may be very revealing, it may not be very representative of the target culture in general. For this reason, teachers need to be able to put the information from the partner class in a wider context. They can do this by providing factual information about the target culture themselves (i.e. teacher as source of information) or by providing students with access to other materials (textbooks, websites, statistical data) which will allow them to judge how representative their partners' comments are.

- **Moderator:** During these three classes, I operated regularly as a moderator of discussions at group and class level which were based on the content of the exchanges and (in the case of the Cultural Studies course in chapter five) of the platform. My aim as moderator during these discussions was to bring learners to carry out deeper analysis of the content, to further develop their theories about the target culture and to reflect on their own culture as well. While the role of moderator was usually limited to class time, during the message board exchange in chapter five Katrin, my partner teacher, and I posted regular messages on the board in an attempt to encourage reflection and focus discussion. Similarly in chapter six, Sheida and I were required to a great extent to time-manage and moderate the videoconference sessions.

Taking into account this wide range of teacher roles, most of which are best suited to the classroom, I would, along with Belz (2003), reject any arguments that an increase in the role of NBLT activities should mean a reduction in student-teacher contact hours. Language learners stand to benefit most from networked activities when they are firmly integrated into their contact classes. In class, they can receive guidance and instruction from their teachers and can reflect on their learning experiences with the support of their classmates.

It is, of course, important that teachers who are preparing to engage in network-based language teaching be made aware of this lengthy list of roles which they will be required to take on in the networked classroom. However, the research presented here has various other implications for foreign language teacher-training courses. Firstly, teachers need to be given practice in on-line intercultural interaction themselves so that they will later be comfortable modelling for their learners how to engage members of the target culture and how to analyse the content of their interaction. Projects which engage trainee-teachers in network-based activities, such as those reported by Legutke (2001), Liaw (2003) and Meskill and Ranglova (2000) therefore play a very important role. The importance of such teacher-training is also underlined by Belz: "the teacher in telecollaboration must be educated to discern, identify, explain and model culturally-contingent patterns of interaction in the absence of paralinguistic meaning signals" (2003: 92). Making teachers aware of the different classifications of cultural content in

on-line communication and the different techniques for questioning and describing one's own culture (such as those described here in chapters four, five and six) will enable them to develop their own guidelines for training their learners. This should not imply that there is a finite checklist of guidelines which teachers and students can use in order to engage in successful telecollaboration. As was the case in this research, each exchange will be different and the particular skills and knowledge which students require will depend on the projects' goals, the chosen communication tools and the particular cultural and institutional context in which the classes are operating. However, an understanding of how cultures differ from each other and a general ability to convert one's aims into effective correspondence and interaction will be necessary for all exchanges.

Secondly, teachers need to be made aware of the importance of developing a close working relationship with their partner-teachers in intercultural exchanges and also of how the cultural and institutional contexts in which both teachers and classes are working can influence the outcome of exchanges. By clarifying with their partners issues such as student evaluation, how regularly students should exchange correspondence and what levels of access both groups have to networked computers will teachers be able to successfully organise their exchanges.

Thirdly, teachers should be exposed to the many different types of practical problems and intercultural misunderstandings which intercultural exchanges often involve. As Müller-Hartmann (1999b) rightly points out, the literature in this area often tends to gloss over the problematic aspects of network-based learning and focuses exclusively on the positive results of projects. It has been shown in this research that telecollaboration is a learning activity which involves many organisational problems and often results in misunderstandings and arguments between learners (see Fischer, 1998 and Kramsch and Thorne, 2002 for further representative examples). Teachers need to be prepared for these events and should be given an opportunity in their training courses to explore how these problems can best be resolved.

Finally, it is advisable that teachers be made aware of how to make suitable choices of on-line tools in order to suit their aims and their students' particular learning context. They may wish, for example, to choose e-mail as this is an asynchronous medium which

gives weaker learners time to reflect before writing, or they may decide to carry out a *Cultura* exchange as the questionnaire analysis can easily be integrated into the contact classes. Courses such as *Ireland and the Irish* which are located on on-line platforms can provide teachers with a source of hypermedia-enhanced factual information about the target culture which can promote an investigative approach to authentic materials. However, they may feel that videoconferencing is more suited for advanced learners as it involves interaction with members of the foreign culture in real time and it requires learners to provide 'on the spot' responses to questions about their home culture. Whatever their choice may be, it is essential that teachers are aware of the different tools available to them, that they understand the different characteristics and advantages which each one has and that they are comfortable working with these tools.

7.4 Implications for the Cultural Dimension of Foreign Language Education

It was seen in chapter one that there are many contrasting views on the role and content of the cultural dimension of FLT. The prominence attributed to affective aims in intercultural language learning has been criticised by many (see section 1.3.1), while others have questioned the value of focussing on a specific target culture in EFL when so many students of English will later use the language as a *lingua franca* to communicate with members of third cultures (see section 1.2.3). Therefore, in this final section it is perhaps useful to explore what implications the results of this research may have for the role of culture in FLT.

Firstly, as was pointed out earlier in this chapter, students often bring a definition of what *culture learning* means which is rather limited and fact-oriented. The use of the word *culture* in the media and quite often in foreign language textbooks to mean *high culture*, or culture with a capital 'C', has meant that many students understand culture learning as the collection of information about the high arts, history and institutions of another country. Of course, as was seen in chapter one, culture learning is much more than this and intercultural learning is based on a definition of culture which is much more holistic and complex than that of students. For this reason, it is recommendable that foreign language learners, whether they are taking part in telecollaborative exchanges or not, should be engaged in awareness raising activities which will help to develop a more anthropological definition of culture and will encourage learners to look beyond a culture's products and practices and look more at the significance which they hold for members of that culture. Activities should also encourage learners to develop their critical cultural awareness and to look for the values and beliefs which underlie the facts and behaviour which they learn about the other culture. Of course, examples of this approach already exist in some textbooks and courses. The following extract from the introduction to a British Cultural Studies book in Romania exemplifies this approach:

> "This book is less concerned about making you learn information by heart than with encouraging you to *process* the information contained here. For example, in the class on Scotland you are asked to *compare* what a Scottish person says about Scotland and what a compilation from reference books says about Scotland. You do not have to learn one or the other, but you do have to learn the process of comparison. The same process of comparison of different kinds of information takes place in many classes. In others, you are

asked to *apply* concepts such as 'gender' or 'nation as imagined community' in your analyses of society. In short, what we want is to provide you with the skills to *argue...*not to learn by heart." (Chichirdan et. al., 1998: 10)

Such an analytical approach to information from the target culture may encourage learners to expand their definitions of both *culture* and *culture learning*.

A second finding relevant for the cultural dimension of FLT was that intercultural learning in third level education can best be supported when courses combine both Cultural Studies and Ethnographic approaches. By taking a *top-down* approach, such as Cultural Studies, students can gain insights into the target culture on a national level and can get a broad overview of the beliefs, meanings and behaviour of the target culture by studying the historical background, statistical data, reports from the national media etc. However, such an approach applied on its own risks missing out on how individuals in the target culture experience their world on a day-to-day, personal level. For this reason, it is advisable to combine Cultural Studies with ethnographic training for learners which will enable them to exploit first hand contact with members of the target culture (through study abroad periods or telecollaboration) to learn about that culture on a local level. Of course, it is also true to say that if students are only exposed to the target culture through ethnographic projects, then they risk having only a limited view of the foreign culture which is not located within a national context. The course reported in chapter five attempted to apply a combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to a certain extent by offering learners Cultural Studies 'factual' materials on Ireland in the on-line modules and then engaging them in first-hand contact with Irish natives in the message board.

Finally, the research in this thesis would appear to support arguments for the maintenance of courses in country-specific Cultural Studies. The evidence presented in 5.6.1 illustrated how the course on Ireland had not only enabled learners to get rid of their stereotypes, but has also enabled them to develop their understanding of how cultures differ from each other and what intercultural communication involves. In other words, although the course was culture specific, the skills and awareness which students had acquired would appear to be culture-general in nature. Furthermore, the research from the telecollaborative projects reported in chapters four and six demonstrated that students' require access to factual cultural knowledge about the target culture with

which they are interacting in order to put their partners' correspondence into context. It is important, for example, that students discussing the issue of gun ownership with American partners be aware of certain 'factual' aspects such as the on-going public debate on this question in the USA, the content of the American constitution and the role of hunting in that country. In short, in contrast to Edmondson (1994), I would argue that it *does* matter whether learners know that Big Ben and Little Richard are not two different classes of boxers. Culture-specific content has an important role to play in foreign language education provided, of course, it is dealt within an intercultural approach which is both comparative and analytical.

7.5 Looking Forward

This thesis has looked at the potential of network-based language learning, and in particular telecollaboration, for developing ICC in university foreign language learners. It has become clear that the complexity of these learning activities should not be underestimated. The research has shown that what learners take away from their on-line work depends, to a great extent, on the skills and cultural awareness which they bring to it in the first place. For this reason, it is important that both teachers and learners are made more aware of what on-line intercultural learning involves. This can be achieved in various ways. First of all, practitioners should be encouraged to publish realistic reports in the literature of their experiences in network-based learning which do not brush over the problems which so often arise. Secondly, teachers should be provided with workshops which raise awareness of what intercultural learning involves and which give them training not only in how to find partners, but also in the other aspects of telecollaboration which were referred to above in 7.3. Students can be given support in how to engage in on-line telecollaboration by being exposed to training materials which focus on the skills of cross-cultural research and collaboration and which develop an *ethnographic* awareness of the role of culture in language and behaviour. The importance of the socio-cultural element can also be made more explicit to learners by extending modes of assessment in telecollaborative exchanges to cover *how* students engage with their partners as opposed to merely whether or not they take part. With such developments in the field of foreign language education, both learners and teachers stand to benefit fully from network-based intercultural learning.

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